

US media responds with hysteria, vindictiveness to Woody Allen and Roman Polanski at Venice film festival

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The Venice International Film Festival was held August 30 to September 9. The presence there of directors Roman Polanski, Woody Allen and Luc Besson caused consternation in the American media, in particular.

Numerous headlines referred to “a controversial trio,” to ongoing “scandal,” to the festival’s “problematic” choice to include the filmmakers. Certain online publications didn’t beat around the bush: “Accused Pedophile Woody Allen Presented His 50th Film in Venice,” “Venice Film Festival Lineup Is Stacked With Creeps,” etc.

Polanski pleaded guilty to unlawful sex with a minor in 1977 in exchange for a probation-only sentence. When a corrupt judge threatened to renege on the agreement and “throw the book” at Polanski, the latter fled the US. His victim, Samantha Geimer, long ago reached an understanding with him and has said she wished she had “never told anyone about” the incident. Polanski is one of the leading filmmakers of the past half-century.

Allen has never been charged with any crime. He is simply the victim of a mad, well-promoted vendetta organized by a rejected lover. Besson was emphatically cleared of the sexual allegation against him.

None of this matters an iota to the disoriented upper-middle class layers who wield such disproportionate influence in the American media.

An article in *Vanity Fair*, for example, complained that Polanski’s *The Palace* and Allen’s *Coup de chance*, both screened in Venice, were “strikingly out of step with the conversations that surround them.” Not wishing to lose hold of this astonishing argument, the article later goes on to assert that “there’s a sense of

disconnect between the seriousness of the surrounding discourse and the lightness” of Allen’s film, and that spectators are also likely to sense the “gulf” between Polanski’s effort “to prompt laughter and the anger on the faces of the protestors outside.”

In other words, Allen and Polanski are guilty of not accommodating themselves to the groundless, slanderous attacks on their lives and careers and the frenzy of the small number of #MeToo supporters on hand to protest against the showing of their films. The witch-hunted should place at the center of their efforts the opinions and feelings of the witch-hunters. One can only feel contempt for such reasoning.

The *Hollywood Reporter*, one of the media driving forces of the McCarthyite “red scare” in the 1940s and 1950s, mused out loud August 29, “How Should the Media Cover Venice’s Problematic Men?” The festival, it wrote, “raises the tricky question of how to report on directors accused of sexual predation—or whether to do it at all.”

The publication cited sympathetically the comments of French feminist Ursula Le Menn, who suggested that “Just having these men at these festivals feels like a celebration of perpetrators,” and that by following the festival line of separating the art from the artist, cultural reporters can become “a kind of witness for the defense, because they repeat the claims the festivals make to put these men in a good light.” Censorship and blacklisting are the answer.

In a particularly foul piece, *Rolling Stone* suggested that Polanski, Allen and Besson “Cast Dark Cloud Over Venice.” (The *Guardian* preferred the “fog of accusation that won’t lift.”) The article argued against making the distinction between “the art” and “the

artist,” which, according to the magazine, “is the mantra we hear each and every time someone in the entertainment world is accused of heinous behavior.”

Rolling Stone observed that the “inclusion of works by these three notorious men has not gone unnoticed at the fest. Signs have been spotted along the Lido that read, ‘Will the Golden Lion go to a rapist?’ (The Golden Lion is the fest’s biggest prize.) ... A group of young protesters, meanwhile, assembled outside the premiere of Allen’s *Coup de chance* on Monday night, chanting slogans like, ‘No rape culture!’ and ‘No spotlight for rapist directors!’”

The magazine argued that the “(largely European) media has been complicit, too. Allen received a standing ovation during his Venice Film Festival press conference, as did Besson.”

Screen Daily commented that some people “don’t get what all the fuss is about: the #MeToo movement has never gained as much momentum in Italy as it has in the US and the UK (Besson was loudly cheered and applauded at his festival press conference).”

Along the same lines, the BBC noted that the “inclusion of these films could simply mark the difference between US and European attitudes to the scandals.” It points out that while Johnny Depp, another target of the #MeToo campaign, “was dropped from the *Fantastic Beasts* franchise in 2020... the Cannes Film Festival opened this May with *Jeanne Du Barry*, a period drama in which Depp co-starred as Louis XV. Thierry Fremaux, Cannes’s General Delegate, said at the time that it wasn’t his job to decide on an actor’s guilt or innocence. Alberto Barbera, the artistic director of the Venice Film Festival, has taken a similar tack.”

Barbera’s argument, suggested the BBC, amounted to “a convenient excuse for shrugging off responsibility or a brave commitment to the principles that people can reform (in Polanski’s case) and that everyone is innocent until proven guilty (in Allen and Besson’s cases). Either way, it’s not what you would hear at an American festival.”

The European press serves the interests of its ruling classes as faithfully as its US counterpart. However, the media in the heart of imperialism is the most corrupt and slavish in the world, having been transformed over the past number of decades into an extension of the Pentagon, CIA and White House. It is also the most

stupendously hypocritical, or, if one prefers, it suffers most from the “lie in the soul, a lie which does not know itself to be a lie,” in the phrase of economist J.A. Hobson.

The US media pivots on a dime from furious denunciations of Russia for violating national sovereignty--a practice the American authorities reserve for themselves--and urging “whatever it takes,” including millions of dead, if necessary, in the Ukraine conflict, to outrage over alleged “sexual predators” in Hollywood. In regard to each, it plays a dirty and reactionary game.

The American media has accepted with hardly a murmur decades of war in the Middle East and Central Asia that have led, directly and indirectly, to 4 to 5 million deaths; a nearly successful fascist coup in the US; a pandemic that has killed more than one million people in the US and well over 20 million internationally; and vast, malignant social inequality.

But hints of sexual wrongdoing! This is something that works them up, this is “injustice” they can sink their teeth into.

The social layer is itself prurient and sordid-minded, this is what interests them. Moreover, the #MeToo campaign has opened paths of economic advancement for a goodly number. Focusing on sex and other subjects designed to overwhelm susceptible middle-class elements also has the aim of diverting attention from burning social questions, such as war, fascism, disease and poverty.

It is no accident that without the Allen-Polanski-Besson “controversy,” far more attention would have been focused in Venice on the continuing strikes by thousands of writers and actors in the US. Instead of the reality of class against class, the media would like to direct the public toward gender and race.

The hysterical, vindictive reaction to the presence of three filmmakers in Venice speaks to the anti-democratic character of the #MeToo campaign and the need for broad layers of artists and others to repudiate this right-wing crusade once and for all.



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