



THE FAN'S DILEMMA

When Your Favorite Artist is a **Monster**

By Brian Stout

A FEW DECADES AGO, it was much more difficult to know about the personal lives of our favorite artists. In fact, those of us who were into independent films and music had a difficult time even finding the work that we craved, let alone information about the creators. Increased access to information about artists complicates matters for those of us who expect better of the people who can help us celebrate, examine, and question existence. At the same time, terms like “woke” and “cancel culture” have been co-opted by the right to criticize the left, which is an interesting counterpoint to banning books and rewriting history curricula.

Many words have been spilled on cancel culture, but Claire Dederer's *Monsters: A Fan's Dilemma*, released over the summer, is a different type of evaluation of problematic artists: one that focuses on The Audience. “Cancel culture” doesn't mean much in a world where Louis C.K. is still winning Grammys and filling arenas, Dave Chappelle is defended on social media and handily compensated by Netflix while making transphobic jokes, and countless other artists are abetted. Coincidentally, C.K.'s teflon resurgence is the subject of a new documentary film that premiered at this year's Toronto Film Festival. It is clear that the court of public opinion is not working from one formula to determine who and what is considered forgivable.

Rather than review the most notable crimes of celebrities such as Woody Allen, Roman Polanski, Bill Cosby, Dederer begins with herself, unable to stop watching Polanski's *Knife in the*

Water and his other highly regarded films, such as *Chinatown* and *Rosemary's Baby*, despite his having been convicted of drugging and raping a minor.

She doesn't feel good about it; she details her struggle with watching Polanski's work. He did, in fact, win a Best Director Oscar as recently as twenty years ago and has continued to work with top-tier talent until only recently. His case was the subject of a documentary, *Roman Polanski: Wanted and Desired*, that seemed to want to excuse his behavior and to make a case for allowing him to re-enter the United States. For Allen, there has been some positive buzz about his latest (and reportedly final) film, which premiered at the Venice Film Festival.

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And what about the reformed monsters, such as Raymond Carver, winner of no fewer than five O. Henry Awards, who spent his early writing years as a hard drinker and abuser of his first wife, but later got remarried, quit drinking, and lived out his sober years writing and fishing, happily married to his second wife? Which chapters of his life do we weigh more heavily?

For one thing, Dederer asserts that there is no calculus we can

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use to determine who is too problematic to support, and there are many factors to consider. *The Cosby Show* was a landmark television series, portraying a functional, upper middle class Black family, but its star was not only a beloved comedian but also a serial sexual predator. She also argues that none of us are powerful enough to truly make a difference by boycotting problematic artists' work. She jokes that she had tried to find work-arounds for Polanski's film such as library lends and free streamer services to assuage her perceived guilt.

Another layer of this is that while we tend to associate the film and the director, many collaborators bring art to life. Woody Allen writes, directs, and acts, but it takes more than one person to make a film. Some might decide to avoid working with him or choose to not support his collaborators, as well. It is possible to argue that they should just opt out of working with Allen or Polanski, but that might not be so easy for below the line talent focused on making ends meet.

And more often than not, there is little blowback on the companies that cut the checks for Allen or Polanski to make more films, who seem to land on "let the market decide." No one in America has been lining up for the latest Allen or Polanski opus for a while now anyway, so studios have a way to appear to take a stand while actually just making sound business decisions. However, Netflix seems to think it's worth writing checks to Dave Chappelle.

The trouble with letting the audience decide is that there are many things we just don't know. Are we hurting the famous person's bottom line by not buying the movie ticket, record, or book? Most likely, the money we spend on art goes to the streamer, the studio, or the record label. And what about those who have already died? Is it okay to buy a ticket for a Picasso exhibit, for example, despite his terrible treatment of the women in his life?

We hold artists to higher standards than the rest of us because they are able to do things many of us cannot, or have been savvy enough to get their work into the popular discourse. Their creativity enriches our lives and we often find it difficult to reconcile that with their bad behaviors that the rest of us mortals engage in.

Critics encourage us to read their evaluations of work as expert, rather than an educated person's opinion. Dederer writes about an older white male critic colleague who announced on one of her social media accounts that he was "done with her" after she admitted that watching



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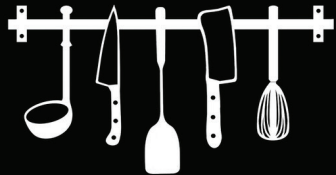




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via its lauded cinematography. She advocates that our critical impressions of art matter as much as the established authorities who peddle their subjective opinions as expertise, but in the age of people thinking they know more than scientists when it comes to vaccines and climate change, it seems as though many have already embraced their critical voices.

We seem to expect that celebrities are heroes or villains, rather than the complicated people who are able to express our hopes, our dreams, and our nightmares. We knew less about the creators even a few decades ago, or tolerated their actions more. She provides the example of being unwilling to give up David Bowie, despite knowledge of his sexual experiences with minors in the 1970s.

Dederer argues that many of us

Manhattan, one of Allen's canonical films in which he has a sexual relationship with a seventeen year-old character played by Mariel Hemingway, made her feel strange. Plenty of her mostly male critic peers encouraged her to separate the art from the artist, and one said, "You're just thinking about Soon-Yi—you're letting that color the movie. I thought you were better than that... You really need to judge it strictly on aesthetics."

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Therein lies one of the issues. Mostly white, mostly cis, mostly male critics have been telling the public how to think about art, as though we aren't capable of deciding on our own. They have set themselves up as the authority rather than an informed voice in the discourse, and many of them find it easier to separate the art from the artist because they have the privilege of remaining unfazed.

Dederer is not advocating that we ignore critical discourse altogether, but to acknowledge that many things can be true about

a piece of art at the same time. *Manhattan* can be problematic in its story, more so when considering Allen's personal life, and also contain intermittently hilarious dialogue and be a love letter to New York

MONSTERS

A Fan's Dilemma



CLAIRE DEDERER

find it easy to hide in the “we” zone as the audience, allowing us to be free from responsibility while simultaneously setting ourselves up as better than the immoral ones. More importantly, it keeps us from examining ourselves and our own indiscretions. By pointing a finger, we can avoid looking at ourselves and our own actions that may have been monstrous.

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Dederer writes candidly about her own struggles with alcohol, and she got sober in 2017. This prompted her to consider who the “bad people” are, and she mentioned that people in AA meetings weren’t fond of “cancel culture.” “There was a note of impatience with the banishing of bad people. Because, after all we [she and other AA members] were the bad people. Or had been bad people and were trying not to be.” She writes, “Quitting drinking undermined my belief in my own righteousness... If I was part monster, surely people who’d done crimes were part human?” She posits that loving someone or something requires a letting go of the perfectibility of people, admitting that even though she was a terrible parent for a few years, her children still love her. Love is based on the idea of setting judgment aside.

Dederer does not excuse Roman Polanski, Louis C.K., Picasso, Joni Mitchell, Kanye West, or any of the other artists she references in *Monsters, A Fan’s Dilemma*. She takes the second part of the title seriously—what is The Audience to do when their favorite piece of art was created by a monster? Her answer to that appears to be that love requires setting judgment aside, so if we are going to love the art, we may need to set our judgment of the artist aside. She aims to expose some of the hypocrisies that exist in the debate on cancel culture as reported. She seeks to discuss the less-discussed parts of the cancel culture equation to emphasize the humanity of the creators and the consumers.

We may want art and artists to be purely good or bad, but the ability to wrestle with it and exist in it is what makes the work worth our time. Do these gifted people owe us their best behavior?



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