

***Chinatown* and Roman Polanski**

by Phillip W. Weiss

***Chinatown* is an excellent movie. It earned eleven Academy Award nominations and is still discussed almost with reverence decades after its initial release. Such acclaim gives cause to comment on the person most popularly associated with creating the movie – the director, Roman Polanski.**

Polanski is a controversial figure. He has a criminal history and is a fugitive from justice. It is true that Polanski also is a victim – of anti-Semitism and of a heinous crime: the savage and wanton murder and mutilation of his wife and unborn child. Yet, despite his exemplary record of cinematic successes and his own victimization, Polanski's reputation remains clouded. What he did, and what he does not deny having done, was seduce, drug, and rape a minor, to wit, a thirteen year old girl. He committed this crime in another party's home, thus implicating that other party. (A detailed account of Polanski's actions can be found in court papers that are a matter of public record.) True, such unsavory and illicit conduct could be rationalized as the indiscretion of a troubled or disturbed man, victim as he is himself, and leave it at that. But then, could the same also be said for the character in *Chinatown*, Noah Cross? In the movie Cross, a sexual deviant and predator, and someone who is obviously troubled and disturbed, goes unpunished. That an injustice has occurred is undeniable. Even the hard-boiled detective in the movie who investigates Cross was shocked.

Yet, three years later Polanski himself would commit illicit acts, and he, too, would be able to evade the full measure of justice, of course, not the way Cross does, or as completely, but nevertheless he manages to flee to avoid sentencing.

After he fled, Polanski continued to make movies and earn accolades. Is that just? Should this man be honored? Now, one might say, "All this hoopla about Polanski is purely academic, perhaps even politically motivated. Who cares what he did? He makes great movies. Let us not judge his work based on his personal life. One has nothing to do with the other." Yet, when Mel Gibson made his now infamous anti-Semitic rant, his career took a major hit – the public did care – and he was a major star. When it was revealed that Tiger Woods had been

unfaithful to his wife, his career, and his reputation, took a huge hit from which he has never fully recovered. When Joe Paterno, arguably the greatest coach in the history of college football, was implicated in a sex scandal involving one of his assistant coaches who had allegedly committed lewd acts with minors, he was summarily fired, publicly disgraced, and his official record excoriated. When Donald Sterling, the owner of an NBA basketball team, reportedly uttered certain racially offensive remarks, said in private, he was fined, banned, and ordered to sell his club. When former heavyweight boxing champion Mike Tyson was convicted of rape, he was sentenced to six years in prison, his reputation and public image in shambles. These are but a few of the many entertainment celebrities who had to answer to lawful authority following brushes with the law.¹

Should Roman Polanski be treated any differently? This question should not be construed as rhetorical. Rather, it is intended to suggest that when discussing Polanski's work, his personal actions, which are a matter of public interest and public record, is a subject that warrants further comment and discussion, especially as it relates to the relationship of the artist to society, and whether Polanski in particular should be granted a pass.

¹ Three more examples: Frances Farmer, Paris Hilton, and Lindsay Lohan.

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