

# VIRGINIE DESPENTES RESPONDS TO THE CÉSARS AND ROMAN POLAŃSKI

by: Virginie Despentes translated by Lauren Elkin, March 2, 2020

*This article was written by Virginie Despentes for Libération and published on March 1st, 2020 in the aftermath of Roman Polański's award for Best Director at the Césars. Lauren Elkin has very kindly translated it from French into English for us. We are also very grateful to Virginie Despentes for granting permission to us to reproduce her work here.*

I'm going to begin like this: don't worry. O you great and powerful leaders, you lot who are in charge: it hurts. No matter how well we know you, no matter how many times we've taken your power on the chin, it always hurts. All weekend we've listened to you whinging and whining, complaining that you've had to resort to passing your laws by decree instead of by vote [

à coups de 49.3

] and that we haven't let you celebrate Polański in peace, and that we're ruining the party, but behind your moans, don't worry—we can hear your pleasure at being the big bosses, the big shots, and the message comes through loud and clear: you don't plan to let this idea of consent take hold. Where would be the fun in being in charge if you always had to ask permission from the people you rule over? And I am certainly not alone in wanting to scream with rage and impotence ever since your magnificent show of force, certainly not the only one to feel defiled after the spectacle.

It is not at all surprising that the César Academy would award Roman Polański the prize for best director in 2020. It's grotesque, it's insulting, it's vile, but it's not surprising. When you award 25 million euros to a guy to make a TV film, the message is in the budget. If the fight against anti-Semitism interested French cinema, we'd know it by now. However, the voice of the oppressed who seize the change to tell their story, we can understand how that might bore you. So when you heard people talking about the subtle comparison between a filmmaker being heckled by a hundred feminists in front of three movie theatres and Dreyfus, a victim of French anti-Semitism at the turn of the last century, you jumped on board. 25 million euros to make this comparison. Amazing. We ought to acknowledge the investors, because to pull together that kind of budget, everyone had to be in on the game: Gaumont

Distribution, the CNC, France 2, France 3, OCS, Canal +, RAI... everyone reached into their pockets, and deeply, for once. You closed ranks, you defended one of your own. The strongest defend their rights: it's part of your elegance, rape is even the foundation of your very style. The law protects you, the courtroom is your domain, the media belongs to you. And that's exactly what a major fortune is there for: to control the bodies of those who have been declared subaltern. Bodies that clam up, that don't tell stories from their point of view. The time has come for the richest to hear this message: the respect we owe them will from now on extend to their dicks, stained with the blood and the faeces of the children they've raped. Whether at the Assemblée Nationale or in the culture—enough hiding, enough pretending not to be upset. You require entire and constant respect, whether we're talking about rape, the brutality of your police, the Césars, your retirement reform. That is your politics: that victims remain silent. It comes with the territory, and if you have to get the message to us through terror you don't see what the problem is. Your sick pleasure, above all. And the only people you tolerate around you are the most docile of lackeys. There is nothing surprising in the fact that you've thus sanctified Polański: it's always money we're celebrating; in these ceremonies we don't give a shit about the cinema. Or the audience. It's the striking capability of your own monetary power that you are worshipping. It's the massive budget you've given him as a sign of support that you were saluting—and through him, your own power that must be respected.

It would be pointless and inappropriate, in a comment on this ceremony, to separate the bodies of cis men from those of cis women. I don't see any difference of behaviour. It is understood that these major prizes continue to be the exclusive domain of men, because the underlying message is: nothing must change. Things are very good as they are. When [the comedian and mistress of ceremonies Florence] Foresti left the awards and declared herself 'disgusted', she didn't do it as a woman—she did it as an individual who was taking the risk of turning the profession against her. And she did it as an individual who is not entirely at the mercy of the film industry, because she knows you don't have the power to deprive her of an audience. She was the only one who dared make a joke about the elephant in the room; everyone else avoided mentioning it. Not a word about Polański, not a word about Adèle Haenel. We all dine together, in this milieu; we all know how it goes. For months you have had your panties in a twist that part of the public is being listened to, and for months you have suffered because Adèle Haenel has spoken up about her

experience as a child actress, from her own point of view.

So all the bodies in that room that evening had been gathered together with one end in mind: to validate the absolute power of the men in charge. And the men in charge love rapists. That is, those who are like them, who are powerful. They don't love them in spite of the rapes, because they have talent. They find them talented and stylish because they are rapists. They love them for that. For the courage they have to acknowledge the sickness of their pleasure, their idiotic and systematic drive to destroy the other, the destruction, in truth, of everything they touch. Your pleasure dwells in preying, that is your only understanding of style. You know very well what you are doing when you defend Polański: you demand to be admired even in your delinquency. It is this demand which results in everyone at the ceremony being subject to a law of silence. They blame political correctness and social media, as if this code of silence were something recent, the fault of the feminists, but it's gone on like this for decades. During French cinematic ceremonies, you never joke about the bosses' sensitivities. So everyone shuts up, everyone smiles. If the child rapist were the bin man there would be no mercy—police, prison, thunderous proclamations, victim defence and general condemnation. But if the rapist is a powerful man: respect and solidarity. Don't speak in public of what goes on doing castings or pre-production or during filming or promotion. It's well-known. The law of silence prevails. Respect for this advice is how you choose whom to hire.

And although we've known this for years, the truth is we're always surprised by the overconfidence of power. That's what's so amazing, in the end—it's that you get away with your dirty tricks every time. Every time, it's humiliating to see the participants take their place on stage, whether it's to announce or to receive a prize. We see ourselves in them—not only me because I'm an insider, but anyone watching the ceremony. We identify with them and are humiliated by proxy. So much silence, so much submission, so much pressing into servitude. We recognise ourselves. We want to die. Because at the end of the night, we know that we are all the employees of this whole heap of shit. We are humiliated by proxy when we see them keep quiet even though they know that *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* won't receive a single one of those big prizes at the end, and only because Adèle Haenel spoke up and because somehow they have to make the victims understand that though they might want to tell their stories, they would do well to think twice before breaking the vow of silence.

Humiliated by proxy that you dared to nominate two female directors who have never received and probably never will receive the prize for best director so that you can give it to Roman fucking Polański. *Himself*. [Both words in English in the original] In your face! You are, decidedly, ashamed of nothing. 25 million, that's more than fourteen times the budget of *Les Misérables* [dir. Ladj Ly, which won best film], and the guy can't even claim his film was one of the five most-seen films of the year. And you reward him. And you know very well what you're doing—that the humiliation experienced by an entire segment of the population who got your message loud and clear will spill over into the following prize, the one you gave to *Les Misérables*, when you bring onto the stage the most vulnerable bodies in the room, the ones which we know risk their lives at the slightest police inspection, and if there are no girls among them at least we see they are intelligent and can tell there is a direct link between the impunity of the famous director that night and the situation in the neighbourhood where they live. The female directors who awarded the prize of your impunity, the directors whose awards are stained with your dishonour— same struggle. They each are aware that as employees of the film industry, if they want to work tomorrow, they have to shut up. No joke. That's the spectacle of the Césars. And what timing—three months of strikes to protest reforms to the retirement system that we don't want, which you passed by force. The same message conveyed to the people at the same time: 'Shut up, keep your mouths shut, shove your consent up your ass, and smile when you pass me in the street because I am powerful, because I have all the money, because I am the boss.'

So when Adèle Haenel got up, it was a sacrilege on the move [*en marche*, a nice dig at Macron's political party]. A repeat offender of an employee, who didn't force herself to smile when her name was dragged through the mud in public, who didn't make herself applaud the spectacle of her own humiliation. Adèle got up, as she had already to say look, this is how I see the story of the filmmaker and the adolescent actress, this is how I lived it, how I carry it with me, how it sticks to my skin. Because you can tell us about it any way you like, your idiotic distinction between the man and the artist—all victims of rape know there is no miraculous division between the body that is raped and the body that creates. We carry around what we are and that's that. Explain to me how I should take advantage of her and then shove a violated girl out the door of my office to get down to work, you bunch of clowns.

Adèle got up and left. On the 28th of February we didn't learn much we didn't already know about the French film industry, but we did learn how to wear an evening gown: like an Amazon [guerrière]. How to walk in high heels: as if we were going to tear the whole building down. How to walk with our heads held high, our necks rigid with anger, and our shoulders bare. The most beautiful image in forty-five years of the ceremony: Adèle Haenel going down the stairs to leave, while you're all applauding. Now we know how it works, someone who walks out while telling you to fuck off. I would trade 80% of my feminist books for that image. That lesson. Adèle, I don't know if I'm male gazing you or female gazing you but I keep love gazing you [all in English and as verbs] on my phone for that exit. Your body, your eyes, your back, your voice, all your gestures say it: yes, we are dumb bitches, we are the ones who've been humiliated, yes, we only have to shut our mouths and take your blows, you're the boss, you have the power and the arrogance that goes with it, but we will not remain seated without saying anything. You do not have our respect. We're getting the hell out. Enjoy your bullshit on your own. Celebrate yourselves, humiliate each other, kill, rape, exploit, smash everything that falls between your hands. We're getting up and we're getting out. It's probably a prophetic image of the days to come. The real difference is not between men and women, but between the dominators and the dominated, between those who intend to suppress the story and impose their decisions and those who are going to get up and get out while complaining, loudly. It's the only possible response to your politics. When it's no longer tenable, when it goes too far, we're going to get up and get out while hurling insults at you. Even if we are your subalterns, even if we take your shitty power on the chin, we despise you. You make us want to vomit. We have no respect for the mockery you make of respectability. Your world is disgusting. Your love of the strongest is sick. Your power is sinister. You are a gruesome bunch of imbeciles. The world you created to reign over the wretched lacks oxygen. We've been getting up and we're getting the hell out. It's over. We're getting up. We're getting out. We're shouting: Go fuck yourselves.

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