

Quebec film distributors censor Roman Polanski's *J'accuse*

By Louis Girard
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Due to the coronavirus crisis, North American movie theaters are closed. But long before the theaters halted screenings, Quebec's major distributors announced they would not make available to filmgoers in the province director Roman Polanski's *J'accuse* (*An Officer and a Spy*), whether out of fear of reprisals from the #MeToo campaign or because they accepted the latter's anti-democratic arguments.

It should be noted that despite the efforts of the Macron government and #MeToo's feminists to intimidate audiences and have *J'accuse* banned, the film was extremely popular in France—by the end of February 1.5 million people had viewed it in that country.

Polanski's film is a truthful and poignant reconstruction of the Dreyfus Affair that shook French society between 1894 and 1906. The case concerned a French army captain of Jewish origin, Alfred Dreyfus, who was falsely accused of espionage and imprisoned.

The film recounts the principled struggle waged over several years by Colonel Georges Picquart, the famous novelist Émile Zola and the political left to obtain Dreyfus' exoneration and freedom.

Those fighting for truth confronted right-wing, nationalist, anti-Semitic and anti-socialist forces—the French army, the church, the bourgeois political parties and Charles Maurras' fascistic L'Action française, which would later become a pillar of the pro-Nazi Vichy government of Philippe Pétain. (Maurras' L'Action française was also the inspiration for the founding in 1917 of the Quebec journal of the same name, later renamed *L'Action nationale*, which was edited in the 1920s by the Quebec ultra-nationalist and virulent anti-Semite Lionel Groulx.)

As the WSWs argued in its November 2019 review of the film, “The history of the Dreyfus Affair is of enormous importance today. After French President Emmanuel Macron hailed Pétain as a ‘great soldier’ last year while launching police repression of social protests, and as forces in the French Ministry of Culture try to re-publish the works of Maurras, it is clearer than ever that it does not solely

belong to the past. Polanski's film on this victory of truth against nationalism and militarism is a significant contribution that deserves a wide audience.”

An article in the Quebec daily newspaper *Le Devoir*, published at the end of February under the headline “Director Roman Polanski, persona non grata in Quebec,” shows the kind of anti-democratic conceptions that have penetrated the world of cinema and the arts.

Encouraged by large sections of the ruling elite, including the Democratic Party in the United States and Justin Trudeau's Canadian federal government, the #MeToo campaign has served to undermine fundamental democratic principles, such as the presumption of innocence and due process. Under conditions of a growing international working class movement against capitalism, #MeToo is also being used by sections of the ruling establishment to divert attention from the vast social inequality. Like other forms of identity politics, the sexual witch-hunting involves as well the drive by sections of the upper middle class to claim a greater share of wealth and privilege (see also: “One year of the #MeToo movement”).

Quebec has had its own #MeToo wave in which prominent personalities in the artistic world have had their careers and reputations instantly destroyed by uncorroborated allegations. In 2016, two individuals alleged that film director Claude Jutra (*Mon oncle Antoine*, 1971), a leading figure in Quebec cinema who died in 1986, had sexually abused them. In blatant violation of the presumption of innocence (all the more necessary since the main accused was no longer able to defend himself), the Quebec film awards gala that bore his name was immediately renamed, as were several streets and parks.

In regard to *J'accuse*, *Le Devoir* approvingly quoted Louis Dussault, president of K-Films America, who asserted: “It's a great film, which should be shown in schools ... but the problem is the author.” He added: “We're not just in business, we're also in culture ... The #MeToo movement is part of that. We saw the film, we weighed the pros and cons, and we thought there's no social acceptability for it.”

Roger Frappier, producer of many films including *The Decline of the American Empire* and *Seducing Doctor Lewis*, asserted that “you can’t separate the man from the artistic work.” With #MeToo, he continued, “with the on-going awareness of sexual harassment or assault, one has to take into account” the broader context surrounding a film.

Antoine Zeind, director of A-Z Films, added: “Everybody knows that he [Polanski] has been guilty since the 1970s. But he won Oscars, he got a César nomination and he had access to a huge budget to shoot *J’accuse*. In theory, if you’re guilty [of a crime], you don’t make a movie, you get a sentence, you’re in jail. You pay your debt.”

It is possible these individuals do not really believe what they are saying and simply prefer to “follow the wave.” But their refusal to distribute Polanski’s film has profoundly reactionary (and cowardly) implications. What they are essentially doing is echoing the slanderous slogan of #MeToo demonstrators, “Polanski rapist, cinemas guilty, viewers complicit,” which can be used to censor anything.

Unsurprisingly, *Le Devoir* repeats in its article the false allegation that Polanski fled from justice in the US. What really happened is that Polanski had reached an agreement with the prosecution in Los Angeles, with the consent of the victim Samantha Geimer (Gailey at the time), and pled guilty to a single count of unlawful sex with a minor. As a result, he was evaluated by psychiatrists who found him not to be a “Mentally Disordered Sex Offender” and recommended a sentence of probation. Polanski only left the US in response to the actions of the presiding judge, who threatened to repudiate the plea agreement with the clear intent of putting him behind bars for many years.

Here is what Polanski recently said about this: “It was my lawyer who told me that, under pressure from the media, the judge had gone back on his word and decided to detain me under what the Americans call ‘indeterminate sentence.’ And that’s when I returned to France. Later, the prosecutor himself said that, under such circumstances, he understood that I had left ... What I am saying here are facts, but nobody ever says that!”

Geimer, who has always shown much more humanity than the servile and vindictive media and the feminists of #MeToo, acknowledged that the deal made with Polanski at the time was satisfactory and that she understood he had to flee under the circumstances.

As in France, the viewing public in Quebec is largely in favour of the film being shown. The thirty or so comments under the article in *Le Devoir* all opposed the reactionary argument that one could not “separate the work from the author” and demanded that Quebec distributors reconsider their decision. Many compared the censorship exercised by the #MeToo campaign and Quebec distributors to the

censorship exercised by the Catholic Church during the era of Quebec history from the mid-1930s to the late 1950s known as the “Great Darkness,” when the Catholic clergy exercised stifling control over culture, education and social mores and the ultraconservative government of Maurice Duplessis promoted reaction and used state violence to suppress an increasingly militant working class.

It is worth citing a few of those comments. Céline Babin writes: “I think that refusing to distribute the film *J’accuse* in Quebec constitutes a form of censorship. Should we avoid looking at Gauguin’s paintings? Should we stop reading Baudelaire and Louis-Ferdinand Céline? Roman Polanski is an excellent filmmaker. His film *The Pianist* is a masterpiece. This kind of media condemnation is extremely dangerous. Let the public decide and don’t condemn artists before they are judged. Justice exists to prevent this kind of abuse.” Gilles Delisle adds: “It’s a great loss for all moviegoers, as well as for all those who have followed this historical episode, since the time of Zola’s writings on the subject.”

There were also a few dissenting voices in the film community. Armand Lafond, who runs the film distribution company Axia Films, and Mario Fortin, owner of several movie theaters in Montreal specializing in repertory films, have said that *J’accuse* should be made available to the general public.

As the WSWS pointed out when *J’accuse* was released in France: “This is a film that should and must be seen by people around the world, especially amid a new resurgence of neo-fascistic parties and officials across Europe and internationally—from the fascistic rantings of the American president to the attempts in the German media to revise the history of Nazism in order to revive German militarism.”

We encourage our readers who live in a country where *J’accuse* is being censored to get it on DVD.

The author also recommends:

Roman Polanski’s masterpiece on the Dreyfus Affair
[November 19, 2019]

#MeToo launches fascistic attack on Polanski’s film *J’accuse*
[November 23, 2019]

One year of the #MeToo movement
[October 19, 2018]

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>