



Victoria Coren Mitchell's Implication of Contributory Negligence in the Polanski Rape Case

In 1977 a middle-aged predatory paedophile selected his victim. Thirteen year old Samantha Geimer was thrilled to be chosen to be photographed by film director Roman Polanski for French Vogue. He then isolated, groomed, drugged and raped her.

Fearing a hefty sentence Polanski fled to Paris where, the following year, he was interviewed by Martin Amis.[1] As his manservant served cold beer in Polanski's 'airy, Hockneyesque' apartment just off the Champs Elysees he spoke about the media circus surrounding him in California.

"I realise if I have killed somebody it would not have so much appeal to the press, but fucking you see, and the young girls."

Note that plural. He goes on,

"Everyone wants to fuck young girls! No, I knew then, this is going to be another big, big thing."

Well, for most people it was a big, big thing. For Victoria Coren – not so much, according to her column in last Sunday's "Observer". In it she describes how two factors had served to recalibrate her previously aggressive feelings towards the rapist.

First, she was moved by a consideration of his unspeakably tragic life. As a small child Polanski escaped from the Warsaw ghetto thus avoiding the fate of his parents who were both murdered at Auschwitz. Twenty-five years later his pregnant wife, Sharon Tate, was one of those slaughtered by Charles Manson's psychopathic gang. It is hard, if not impossible, to imagine the psychological effects of these horrors. Mental health might very well be relevant in the evaluation of a child rapist but the sadness of his story, alone, is not.

Coren is on even shakier ground with her second "complicating" factor which concerns the "beauty and humanity" of his films. Where was his humanity when he was raping the child you may ask? And I'm glad you're asking because Victoria Coren isn't. Surely Polanski's filmic compassion should not affect our response to his actions in real life. Blurring this boundary is no less acceptable than berating a soap star on the street when his character cheats on his onscreen wife. You hear about these people. They tend not to have columns in the Observer.

None of this would matter too much if Coren, in writing her piece, had simply illustrated the universal temptation to make excuses for people we like or admire. As Oscar Wilde wrote "Morality is simply the attitude we adopt towards people we personally dislike." Coren's feelings are the flip side of this which she unconvincingly dresses up as 'nuance'.

But Coren went further than that. It seems the recalibration of her feelings primed Coren's pen to downplay the facts of the rape itself. She describes the events on the day thus:



He gave her several glasses of champagne and part of a sleeping pill, then had sex with her. It was statutory rape. Geimer says, "It was rape in every sense of the word. I said no."

The way in which he had sex with her is indelicate to include, but important. Geimer's book expresses it with literate sarcasm, referring to a sympathetic psychological report after Polanski's arrest which cited his "solicitude concerning pregnancy" as a mitigating factor. Geimer says, this was an interesting new euphemism for sodomy".

Her choice of language has been widely challenged. Why use this phrase "had sex with" rather than the more accurate "raped?" Coren was typically robust on Twitter arguing,

I used the word rape four times, and sodomy once. I think most people got the message.

Well one of the messages they got was that she was calling the crime "statutory rape". This expression, although applicable to any sexual intercourse with a minor, is most commonly associated with underage victims who may have agreed to sex but whom the law considers too young to give consent. In applying this term to Polanski's case – which would have been rape no matter what age the victim – Coren slyly introduces the idea of consent.

Had Coren used the word 'rape' as a verb as in, "Polanski gave her several glasses of champagne and part of a sleeping pill and then raped her" the meaning would have been unequivocal. But you can not add the word "statutorily" to the verb 'rape' without sounding ridiculous. As a verb 'rape' packs a punch, putting the action into the act, bringing the terrifying reality briefly to life.

Or rather, in this case, it doesn't. So why didn't VCM use the accurate word - rape? What was holding her back? Was it the film "The Fearless Vampire Killers"? It's a great film – one of Polanski's best - but it didn't have that effect on me. I can still write "he raped a child" without difficulty. Was it too harsh a verb to describe the actions of an artist? Or was Coren avoiding it to protect the idea of "statutory rape" and the suggestion of consent? In other words, did she avoid using the verb 'rape' because she didn't, deep down, think it was the right word to use without that qualification?

And what's going on with 'sleeping pill'? What Polanski gave Geimer was a Quaalude which is a powerful sedative, muscle relaxant, and sleeping pill, according to dose. It was widely used recreationally in the seventies - often to come down from other drugs. Alcohol would intensify its effects – which is perhaps why Polanski didn't give his victim a whole one. A perceptive comment on the Guardian's website described the difficulty of moving when under the influence of Quaaludes, remarking,

"It's not the kind of drug you give to someone you want



to have sex with. Unless of course you want to rape them.”

The word Quaalude is not used in Coren's account – perhaps because of its evocation of sixties and seventies excess. In fact Coren has chosen her words extremely carefully. In two sentences – just 22 words – she manages to remove from the account any hint of Polanski's hedonistic lifestyle, along with the word 'rape' while at the same time introducing the idea of consent. Nice work.

Coren is seized with uncharacteristic coyness when she hesitates before informing us that the child was sodomised. She prepares the ground first, warning us it's "indelicate". I'll say. I'll also say that word 'indelicate' is far too delicate to use in relation to anal rape. Why all this sudden reticence? Is this the same Victoria Coren who directed her own porn film and wrote a book about it?

We only learn it was anal rape after Coren has given us Polanski's explanation for his sexual choices that afternoon. So before we find out that the child was sodomised we're fed the words "sympathetic" and "solicitude" and "mitigating".

But why has Coren given us Polanski's mitigation before we know what it refers to? To soften the blow? To tailor our response to the information? To suggest that he cared about her, while he was raping her? Geimer doesn't buy the excuse and neither should we. The question is – does Coren? And is that why she includes it?

Other elements contribute to this air of partiality. Coren mentions that Geimer doesn't want Polanski imprisoned. What if she wanted him shot in the eyes and hit with a Fiat 500? Shall we factor that in too? But Coren doesn't discuss any of this, just puts it out there, in what becomes little more than a minimising, mitigating list. One paragraph consists of a single sentence.

She has been exchanging emails with Polanski for several years.

This is very misleading. Geimer said in her BBC Hardtalk interview the email contact has been extremely limited. Coren makes it sound like a regular, sustained correspondence between friends.

The next paragraph is formed from two unrelated sentences.

She says that the police investigation, hospital exams and reporting of the case were more traumatic than the attack itself.

She says: "I did something wrong, I was stupid... To pose topless, and to drink and to take the [sleeping] pill."

Coren is trying to downplay Polanski's responsibility for Geimer's suffering but this backfires. While Polanski is not responsible for the State of California's court system it was his action, and



his action alone, which subjected the child to it. Coren's twisted logic sees the comparison of the rape with its aftermath as something in Polanski's favour.

It is Coren's use of the following quotation from Geimer's book which has been most widely criticised. "I did something wrong..."

In interviews Geimer states matter-of-factly that she shouldn't have drunk the booze, taken the Quaalude or obeyed Polanski when he asked her to take her top off. But the 'wrong' she is talking about here does not form any part of the wrong of the rape itself. This is the 'wrong' of the teenager having a fag behind the bikesheds. It's the "wrong" of an adult getting into an unlicensed minicab and being attacked who might reflect "I was wrong to get into the car" meaning "I was stupid to get into the car." It doesn't mean they accept, or they should accept, any responsibility for the attack itself.

The fact that Coren yokes this quotation, which is a non sequitur, to her previous piece of mitigation is hugely problematic. She implies that Geimer is admitting to some sort of 'contributory negligence'. Even if Geimer had meant such a thing it is surely incumbent on a columnist in a national newspaper to come out and make absolutely clear that she does not believe anybody – let alone a child – can be guilty of 'contributory negligence' in rape cases. Unless, of course, this is not her view.

A therapist on the Oprah Winfrey Show believed Geimer to be showing classic signs of victim-guilt when she talked of being 'wrong' in some of her behaviour and Geimer says in the book that she found this patronising. Coren seizes on this

Who dare patronise her further by saying it wasn't?

This is a neat trick. Coren shackles her piece to Geimer's book, appropriating the privileges of the victim. This becomes a spring-loaded mechanism which goes off whenever she is accused of being a rape apologist - as this exchange from Twitter illustrates.

@Victoriacoren To all those saying it was a "defence of rape", or that rape itself is nuanced, I'm afraid I just don't think you understood it. Sorry.

@T_Bone_Optional How condescending!! I understand your article perfectly, but you just couldn't be more wrong. #rapeapologist #unfollow

@VictoriaCoren Well then, me and Samantha Geimer both. But I respect her to speak about her own rape, and don't assume I know better.

Coren can't see anything wrong with her article. She points repeatedly to her line "This is not an excuse..." as if this magically detoxifies the litany of mitigation which defines the piece. It doesn't of course - any more than, "I'm not a racist but" negates the racism in what invariably



follows.

So why is Coren doing this? Why does she minimise, downplay, cherry-pick, insinuate and misrepresent? Why does she omit so much – the grooming, the premeditation, the civil proceedings (which referred to “false imprisonment” and which [Polanski settled out of court?](#)) Why has she slanted the piece so far in Polanski’s favour that the term ‘child rape apologist’ begins to look appropriate?

Perhaps Coren is simply star struck, unable to disentangle artistic glory from real life. That is certainly true of the grim list of signatories to the petition protesting at Polanski’s re-arrest in 2009. Is Coren unwittingly viewing it all through the distorting lens of the bourgeois obsession with success?

Whatever the reason Coren has become a poster girl for rape apologists everywhere. Her victim-blaming has been widely greeted with dismay and her childish accusation that anybody who disagrees with her either hasn’t understood or is somehow silencing rape victims is disingenuous and cowardly. I hope she comes to her senses soon.

Towards the end of his interview with Martrin Amis, Polanski made a telling remark. “Women’s Lib is an absurdity... Things are as they are because of evolution.” Yes, evolution – and a pocketful of Quaaludes, Roman. He’s not so good in real life, is he?

1. Amis, M. "Visiting Mrs Nabokov", 1993.