

New York Times attempts to keep the #MeToo pot simmering

Sorry/Not Sorry: The continuing campaign against comedian Louis C.K.

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Sorry/Not Sorry (2023) is a new documentary about comedian Louis C.K. directed by Cara Mones and Caroline Suh. It focuses on the artist's inappropriate and much-publicized sexual behavior, his public apology, his withdrawal from the spotlight and his successful return to comedy.

The identity of the film's producer, the *New York Times*, which first published allegations against C.K. in November 2017, provides a clue as to the film's agenda. The documentary is an attempt to keep the #MeToo pot simmering at a time of genocide, war, a growing fascist threat and economic crisis. If the film illuminates anything, it is the role of the *Times* as a mouthpiece of self-involved, upper-middle-class moralists. In the midst of mass death in Gaza, this is what dominates these people.

The film describes C.K.'s rise to stardom through interviews with Abby Schachner and Jen Kirkman, both comedians, and with Noam Dworman, the owner of the Comedy Cellar, which is the premier comedy club in Manhattan. C.K.'s act evolves from absurdism toward examinations of human weaknesses and sexual relations. Over time, C.K. earns praise for his honesty and becomes one of the most popular and highly regarded comedians of the day. He makes appearances on television, gets an opportunity to make a film and becomes a powerful figure in the entertainment industry.

The interviewees describe the rumors that circulated among performers for several years about C.K.'s exhibitionism and masturbation. Kirkner relates crude comments that C.K. made to her, and Schachner describes a phone call during which she realized that C.K. was masturbating while talking to her. We also

hear how C.K. invited comedienne Dana Min Goodman and Julia Wolov (who are not interviewed in the film) to his hotel room, stripped naked and masturbated in front of them.

After the *Times* published an article that included the allegations of Goodman, Wolov, Schachner and two other women, C.K. publicly admitted that the stories were true. "The power I had over these women is that they admired me," he wrote in a statement. "And I wielded that power irresponsibly." He concluded by saying that he would "step back and take a long time to listen."

C.K.'s repeated self-exposure and self-gratification seem compulsive. The comedian clearly has psychological problems, and one is entitled to wonder whether they have ever been addressed. As we have written, "Perhaps one of his producers, directors or agents might have done more, or anything, to help Louis C.K. if he or she had not been so fixated on making as much money off the comic's work as possible."

About nine months after his public apology, C.K. began a successful comeback with an unannounced appearance at the Comedy Cellar. Audiences welcomed him warmly. C.K. performed to packed houses and received ovations. His special *Sincerely, Louis C.K.* (2022) won a Grammy Award for best comedy album. During the same year, he released his film *Fourth of July*.

The comedian's redemption is anathema to the *Times* and the #MeToo cabal. Wesley Morris, a *Times* film critic best known for his persistent and pernicious racialism, finds fault with C.K.'s apology and insists that atonement is a process.

In other words, C.K. has not suffered enough to satisfy Morris. Speaking of C.K. and others who have engaged in inappropriate or worse behavior, he says, “The longer you think about it, the harder it is to really care what art these men make.” This is an appalling statement for any “critic” to utter. Are we to reject all work made by artists, in whatever medium, who are not paragons of virtue? If so, what culture would we be left with?

Comedian Aida Rodriguez injects racist politics into the discussion. “Usually, white men get away with the stuff that they do,” she says. “Where’s the cancel culture? Tell me what happened!” For Rodriguez’s information, so-called cancel culture is alive and well, and even innocent people are victims of it. Woody Allen, Kevin Spacey and Geoffrey Rush are just three artists whose careers were derailed by allegations that the *Times* and other outlets promoted relentlessly. Conductor James Levine was essentially driven to his death. When subjected to official investigations or examined in court, the allegations against Allen, Spacey and Rush were found to have no merit.

Times journalist Melena Ryzik, who cowrote the 2017 exposé, notes that after C.K. exposed himself to Goodman and Wolov, the duo’s career did not develop as would be expected, given their previous success. This is the crux of the #MeToo movement: careerism. It aims not to improve society but to claim a bigger piece of the pie for a complacent layer of the upper middle class. To this end, it stirs up moral outrage and launches frontal attacks on the presumption of innocence and due process.

It bears mentioning that C.K. has not been accused of any crime. His behavior, while deplorable, did not destroy any lives. Morris implies that C.K.’s actions traumatized some women so much that they “didn’t get to do anything” professionally after witnessing it. He also states that some comedians “were prevented from getting jobs” because of C.K. But none of the women interviewed in this documentary make such claims.

In fact, Schachner responded to her experience with humaneness. She describes having felt duped after her phone call with C.K., but when he reached out to her to apologize, she forgave him. “My dad didn’t do the most wonderful things, and I still love him,” she explains. If people “don’t always follow the path of the norm ... it doesn’t justify hurting people,” she adds. As

if realizing that this is not the sentiment that the filmmakers are after, she trails off.

Dworman not only provides a principled defense of C.K., but goes further. “The people who are saying that Louis shall not work, they need to be questioned more closely as to where they draw the line,” he tells a radio interviewer. “How much evidence do they think is enough? How long is enough? How long should somebody go without working? What should they do when they’re not working? Should they become wards of the state? Can they do some jobs, but not other jobs? Is it okay for Wal-Mart to hire Louis, or is he so radioactive that nobody shall hire him?” Lacking concern for anyone but themselves, the #MeToo attackers have little time for such questions.

The filmmakers openly support the continued campaign against C.K., and not the humane and democratic sentiments that some interviewees express. But their stance does not play well with the public, as C.K.’s comeback and continued popularity demonstrate. Consciously or not, audiences are looking for artists to address the current social crisis seriously. C.K.’s honesty has won him a broad following, but his outlook has great limitations. The emergence of vital and illuminating art, like the defense of democratic rights, will depend on a conscious orientation toward burning social and political matters.



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