

264. Roseanne Conner is not Roseanne Barr: The former should be appreciated as entertainment, the second should enjoy freedom of expression

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Under the title “Pulling rug out from under Roseanne resolves nothing”

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Roseanne Barr tweets a comment many find racist and abhorrent, and *Roseanne*, Ms Barr’s television show, is cancelled by the network and TV stations drop it from their programming.

Well, Roseanne got what she deserved, people say.

There are two problems with this response. The first is that it expresses disdain for freedom of expression. The second is that it is a piece of philistinism.

Now it is true that people should be free to walk away from a television show or even to agitate for it to be cancelled for any reason they wish, good or bad. But someone who values open and free discussion would respond simply with criticism and her own good example, and wouldn’t try to harm anyone, either economically or socially.

Agitating to have the show cancelled or dropped from the schedule is a way of putting pressure on people not to say what is on their minds. It’s a way of trying to silence people, to remove them and their views from the conversation.

It’s not a way of engaging with them on the topic at hand, of trying to show them that their views are false, their values unsound, or their arguments weak.

People who value freedom of expression value it because they think respect for others requires that everyone be able to think what they want and to say what they think. They value it because they think hearing what people might say is an excellent way of identifying problems and finding solutions to them.

And they value it because those whose views are rejected after having been heard will know they have been treated fairly. Those, on the other hand, whose views are suppressed will consider themselves to have been ill-used. They will have lost a reason to keep the peace.

Agitating to have *Roseanne* cancelled is, then, a blow against openness and candour. People will not speak their minds if they understand that they might lose their jobs or their social standing. The result is an enforced and insincere conformity in opinions and attitudes.

Those who take issue with what Ms Barr tweeted should certainly speak to what she said. They should criticize her views or her taste or her judgement, whatever they think is false or lacking. Criticizing her manifests respect for her as a conversational partner and it encourages candour and discussion all around.

The point here is general. Boycotts, shaming, and the like can be appropriate only when a policy or behaviour is at issue, not when the issue is an opinion. Boycott the factory that fails to pay workers a decent wage, if you think that such pressure will cause change. Don’t, though, boycott the pundit who argues against decent wages.

The second reason not to act against the network or the show is that doing so is a piece of philistinism. Art and entertainment are to be judged only on grounds relevant to art or entertainment. The views or character of a performer are not grounds on which to judge the performance.

People who like *Roseanne* should want to watch and enjoy it independently of their concerns about Ms Barr's opinions, attitudes, or judgement. It is not particularly hard to separate the entertainment from the entertainer and the art from the artist. Moreover, one should want to be able to do so, for the world is that much richer when one appreciates its various aspects for their own sakes.

One can both like *Roseanne* and abhor what Roseanne said. Abhorring the opinions need not and should not affect one's delighting in the work.

This philistinism, this inability or unwillingness to see entertainment or art for what it is and to appreciate it as entertainment or art, is widespread in our culture, and it is making us pinched and narrow. We should be happy to give taste its due, and not make it subservient to any of the other things we care about.

We saw the same thing recently in connection with Kevin Spacey. After Spacey was accused of sexual abuse and worse, he was dropped from the TV series *House of Cards*. As well, a film he had in pre-production was cancelled, and his scenes in the movie *All the Money in the World* were reshot with Christopher Plummer in his role. None of these changes were aesthetically motivated.

Let me mention two other incidents.

In May 2017, organizers of an event at the University of Guelph apologized for playing Lou Reed's transphobic song "Walk on the Wild Side." Everyone had a good laugh, for the song isn't transphobic. Some critics then went on to praise the organizers for at least being sensitive to such matters. "Walk on the Wild Side," though, is a gem, and that's all that should matter to music programmers. Dropping it from a playlist even were the lyrics objectionable would be a sin against pop music.

In April 2015, TSO president and CEO Jeff Melanson took exception to Valentina Lisitsa's views on Russia and the Ukraine, or perhaps to the way in which she expressed them. He replaced Ms Lisitsa with another pianist for a performance of Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2. Happily, Mr Melanson's actions met with derision in Europe and elsewhere in the world; sadly, not so much in Canada.

If we valued freedom of expression, we would not seek to harm people financially or socially for expressing their views. And if we cared for art for art's sake, or entertainment for entertainment's sake, it wouldn't even cross our mind to drop a show or replace a pianist for whatever vile opinions she expressed.