**'Malcom & Marie' Takes Shots at Film Critics to Avoid One Important Conversation**

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Zendaya’s leading lady debut is here in the form of Netflix’s Malcom & Marie, an anti-love story that follows a couple through one long night of heated conversation and ripping arguments. Every piece of the film touched by Zendaya, and costar John David Washington, is what makes it a triumph, and where it fails is on the page, not on the screen. I would love to simply celebrate Zendaya’s performance and art and stop there, but that would be excluding a major piece of this film’s conversation. The film’s writer and director, Sam Levinson, cemented his style through HBO’s Euphoria and the 2018 Assassination Nation, his name, however, was made before the writer learned to write. The entertainment industry is no stranger to nepotism, and this writer can forgive a bit of nepotism when the result is Sofia Coppola or Jake Gyllenhaal. Sam Levinson, the son of famed filmmaker Barry Levinson, is not all that different from these talents. He himself is beyond talented, there is no denying the Euphoria-effect on modern culture, but his talent doesn’t excuse privilege, which is piercingly relevant in this situation. In the days that followed the release of Malcom & Marie, critics greater than I were quick to highlight an obvious source of discomfort. Is this privileged, albeit talented, white filmmaker using black actors as a mouthpiece to air his own petty grievances?

This film could perform well in the awards circuit. The industry maintains a level of narcissism, as their weakness has always been art about art and the desire to see themselves reflected on screen. Filmmakers love movies about movies. Where Levinson shot himself in the foot here was the extended discussion surrounding film criticism. In the first few minutes of this tortured monologue, I sat in acceptance. I understand the frustration of spending years on a project, putting every drop of creativity into it, just to have a journalist publish a moratorium mere hours after release. The extended ranting over critics and the issue of identity politics in art reminded me of that old Shakespeare phrase, thou doth protest too much. Are we more triggered by things that deep down, we know to be true? Does Levinson’s issue with identity politics and context in art stem from his own insecurities as a privileged white creator?

Levinson displays great anger about the industry’s need to find meaning and motive in art where it doesn’t exist, but is he excusing his own exploitation of black voice in this film? In a meta-sense, he compares his work to that of Spike Lee and Barry Jenkins, pondering how Jenkins could write Moonlight as a straight man, and why does his relation to the story even matter? That of course, is nonsensical given the fact that much of the Moonlight story came from Jenkins’ experiences growing up poor and black in Miami, and the original play was written by Tarell Alvin McCraney, who is openly gay.

By railing against the idea of motive, Levinson attempts to distract viewers from wondering why. Is Levinson pouting about his relationship to the industry, while hiding behind a black voice? Instead of addressing his privilege, he stands as a ventriloquist to a black actor mouthing, ‘why’s it gotta be black?’ Levinson does all of this, while simultaneously priming the post-release conversation, framing critics and dissenters at large as shallow, sensitive, and simple. In the harshest of criticisms, I would call this script a bit manipulative. A slow burn of a conversation grooms the viewers into sympathy for artists whose motives are questioned, when in reality it is Levinson I have questions for.

It feels sneaky to start with a pretty valid conversation about art and motive, asking ‘does everything always have to have a reason, can’t art sometimes exist without context?’ From there it falls off the tracks as John David Washington’s voice starts to sound more and more like Levinson’s, shouting ‘fuck critics’ and specifically those who critique the filmmaker’s portrayal of women on screen. This is where Levinson truly shows his cards, without this point, he may have gotten away with it. In the past, his portrayal and sexualization of women has been a very specific critique fired at Levinson, so to attach that particular rant to Malcom’s fictional movie tells us what we need to know.

A masterclass in exploitation, both on and off the screen, Malcom & Marie also breaks very interesting conversation around the burden of the muse. Some critics are questioning the age gap between Malcom and Marie, but I have no questions. Essentially a two-hour long conversation, this film should be boring, but it’s far from it. Malcom & Marie feels like an emotional ping-pong match, with Zendaya and John David Washington volleying back and forth through emotional diatribes, slowly uncovering the truth of the relationship. The opening moments depict a beautiful young woman and her older filmmaker boyfriend returning from his movie premiere, our leading lady upset that he did not thank her in his speech. What seems like a superficial and immature point of contention which many may be quick to blame on an age gap, devolves into the truth. Malcom stole Marie’s story, exploited her for her pain and then found success without her. His early rants about finding meaning, and how not every piece of art has to be derivative of someone’s real experience, is just a mask he wears to ignore the reality that he lifted this story and pain from Marie, having never experienced anything similar in his life of privilege. The irony of Malcom exploiting Marie’s experiences for his art, whilst Levinson follows suit is hard to ignore.

All said, Sam Levinson is a talented writer, proving his chops in just one season of Euphoria. I am truly a massive fan of Levinson’s work as a writer and his aesthetic taste, despite my concerns. One of his greatest skills as a writer is his ability to blur the lines between antagonist and protagonist in seconds, he is a truly objective writer in that way. We’ve seen that skill more recently in the twin Euphoria specials dedicated to Rue and Jules, which essentially tell show two vastly different sides of the same coin, leaving viewers confused as to who to root for before realizing that is the point. We are all flawed and complex people, and rarely is anyone objectively right or wrong, good or bad, artist or muse, exploiter or exploited.