

ASIA ARGENTO AND THE STAIN

Comment to the interview with Giletti

by Carlo Bonomi

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I was quite impressed by the recent events surrounding Asia Argento and how the media reacted. The events are well known to all. About a year ago, Asia's declarations concerning the Weinstein case contributed to kick off the *#MeToo* movement of denouncing sexual harassment, which brought together known and lesser-known voices of the film industry and beyond. The resulting uproar ended up with the movement being declared "Person of the Year" by Time magazine. Famous actresses then began to object, claiming there was a right to courtship. Controversy and accusations followed, and the movement started being accused of hysteria or hypocrisy. The well-known ways of how sex played into the forging of a new actress's career was brought into the spotlight and was eventually followed by personal attacks aimed at discrediting what the victim had to say: Why does she come forth only now? Why didn't she report it then? If she was raped, why did she continued to see her rapist? And so it went, with all the questions aimed to show that the victim is not a saint, because if she were truly spotless, she would have reacted, and certainly would not have been silent for years. She would have reported him immediately. And given that she didn't, the truth must lie elsewhere ...

But why should the victim to be a saint? Why do we expect the victim to prove to be immaculate? It would seem that in the swirl of emotions the kind of reaction that we call "to blame the victim," has taken command. It is a primitive, tribal reaction. I recall an episode that came up in the news a few years ago, where a father – perhaps from Pakistan, I do not remember well – had his daughter killed because she had been raped. Here the "stain" is quite evident, represented precisely by the fact of being the victim. Having his daughter killed was the way this father had washed away the stain. After all, until not long ago even in our society, the fact of having endured a rape was widely considered something to be "ashamed" of, something to keep hidden. The idea was skillfully exploited by the lawyers of the accused during the rape trial, aiming to show that the victim was not spotless.

Then, last summer, of Asia Argento's "stain" became more and more substantial, first with the suicide of her partner, the famous chef Anthony Bourdain, and shortly thereafter with the case concerning Jimmy Bennet. Social media attacks began arriving when, two days after the loss of her partner on June 8, 2018, Asia took part

in the X-Factor auditions. For her it was a question of "survival", clinging to a thread of life, as she herself explained. But social media attacked for her "lack of feelings".

Would she have received such treatment under different conditions? Or was it an emotional reaction brought on by her accusations of Weinstein and the #MeToo movement? – as if the chorus were shouting: This is who she really is!

And the worst was yet to come. On August 19, 2018, the New York Times published an article titled, "Asia Argento, a #MeToo Leader, Made a Deal With Her Own Accuser." It was Jimmy Bennet, the Baby-Star born in 1996 who in 2004 had played the role of son in a film directed by Asia in which she herself was cast as the mother. Since then they had been in contact but had not seen each other until 2013, when they met in a hotel room. The accusation was that the actress (37 years) had sexually abused the boy (17 years).

Apparently Mr. Bennet understood that he had been a victim when the Weinstein case had come to light and through a law firm had asked for a major compensation from Asia on the basis of two facts. The first was that after the rape his earnings had collapsed, what allowed to quantify the damage (incidentally in 2013 Bennet had also discovered that his earnings had been subtracted from his parents, for which he sued them). The second was that Asia's companion, Bourdain, a very rich man who was also prominent in the media, was mentioned in the request for money. Bourdain thought it would be better to come to terms rather than end up in a media storm, and therefore paid the first installment. Later it would emerge that, immediately after the death of Bourdain, Asia Argento blocked the payment, thereby showing that she did not agree with the original choice and considered the request for money nothing more than blackmail to which she chose not to adhere.

The scandal had erupted only after the payments had been interrupted, with a worldwide resonance and heavy consequences for Asia Argento. Not only did some #MeToo protagonists react by trying to dissociate the movement from Asia, now depicted as a "pedophile", but Sky has interrupted their X-Factor collaboration with Asia. While allegations of "pedophilia" were immediately retracted, along with the clarification of major distortions, Sky, who controls X-Factor, has not made any step back, and indeed confirmed the dismissal of Asia from the talent show.

On September 23 and October 1st, Massimo Giletti conducted two interviews, the first with Jimmy Bennett and the second with Asia Argento, which have offered, I think, important clarification on the matter. I will leave aside Bennett's version, on the one hand clearly driven by an economic intent, and on the other hand made too complex to be discussed in just a few lines given his position as victim of the "Baby Stars" system. What is it that I found convincing in Asia's version?

1. The emotional tie with Bennett seen via a tweet that Asia sends before their meeting: "*Waiting for my long lost son my love @jimmymbennett in the hotel room: I cry, I sweat, I pace, I tremble. I am alive.*" Asia explained that she too had been a baby-star and that, like all the baby-stars, she had seriously risked getting lost. Then she found her own way, but it was very hard. The link that joined her to Bennet – who had been the most requested child in the film industry, starring with all possible stars of Hollywood - was therefore that of the common experience of a stolen childhood. Asia grew fond of the baby-star because she had seen in him a reflection of herself as a child. The "long lost child" who she was expecting was the lost part of herself. I believe that this regressive rescue fantasy prevented her from realizing who she really had before her.
2. It would seem that Asia was disposed to relive her childhood trauma aiming at some sort of reparation. She was overwhelmed by emotion and wanted to help Bennett, who had asked to be helped with a script for which Asia was happy to once again be of assistance. Bennett had then spoken of his difficulties in finding work and Asia, who knew the problem well, having gone through it herself, had immediately proposed a small part in a film that was to be made in Rome.
3. Asia, up to this point has been very affectionate, but then Bennett jumps on her telling her that she had been his erotic dream since their first encounter. Here, Asia freezes, does not react and does not defend herself. In the months following the encounter she will work with a psychotherapist, focusing precisely on her inability to defend himself in such situations. Many have found this version of events scarcely plausible, but I would like to mention that the shock, the freezing and the inability to defend oneself are typical reactions in such situations. Freud, during the period in which he was interested in trauma had found the distinctive character of a traumatic experience precisely in the "missed reaction".
4. We also see at work the two-phase character of the trauma described by Ferenczi in "Confusion of Tongues Between Adults and the Child", where it is Asia, however, who comes close to speaking the child's tender language, which is then misunderstood and flooded with passion. We also know that the moment the child suffers an assault that is not expected, he or she remains confused. The ego does not react because it "leaves itself". The protection that automatically happens as a reaction, as described by Ferenczi, is to not be present. What is happening cannot be true, it is not happening to me. The

person leaves him or herself and takes refuge in a dreamlike world. This phase seems to me well documented by the selfie Bennett takes right after sexual intercourse, in which Asia's face appears to be in a clearly dreamy state. Only with time will Asia understand that for Bennett she was nothing more than a "trophy" – as immortalized precisely by the selfie.

5. Then Asia invites Bennet to the restaurant. Many have found this behavior inappropriate and incongruent given the violence incurred. This also, however, was well explained by Asia, who spoke of her need for "normalization", that is, an attempt to return the hand of the clock back to before the assault, not only to deny it, but also to restore the previous image of Bennett of which she was so fond. This image had been destroyed by the assault, but, evidently, Asia was not yet ready to lose what Bennett meant to her – the Lost and found child that she herself had been.

To conclude, despite the terrible weight of events, the repeated attacks and her obvious fragility, I found Asia Argento courageous and consistent and her narrative convincing. In my eyes she was able to dissipate all the confusion that is created in such situations, thereby succeeding in not being absorbed by the "stain".

Instead, I find Sky's confirmation of Asias's dismissal from X-Factor as socially dangerous, not only because this decision punishes a courageous person in a moment of great vulnerability, but because it gives value to Asia Argento's "stain", and because such a move sends a heavy warning to young people: this is what happens to those who have the courage to come forward with their truth.