

Praise — "Gritty realism" and the problem of perspective

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Praise is one of the more successful Australian films released this year. Still showing at some metropolitan cinemas and soon to be released on video, the locally acclaimed movie secured the International Film Critic's Award at last year's Toronto Film Festival. Adapted from the novel of the same name by Andrew McGahan, who also wrote the screenplay, the film is the directorial debut of John Curran, an American who has been living in Australia since 1988.

Set in Queensland and shot in Sydney, *Praise* is about Cynthia (Sacha Horler) and Gordon (Peter Fenton) and their doomed relationship. Gordon is 25 and works in a bottle shop (liquor store) but quits because he does not want to work four days in a row. He is an alcoholic and an acute asthmatic who smokes incessantly. Cynthia works as a barmaid, is extremely extroverted (almost manic), as well as being sexually and emotionally demanding. She suffers from eczema, which has ravaged her face and body. Cynthia is the antithesis of Gordon, who is so passive that he is almost comatose.

After a night of drinking and smoking at her parents' house, who are away and preparing to move to Darwin in Australia's far north, Cynthia and Gordon spend the next week together drinking and having sex. After several days Cynthia tells Gordon, "I think I'm falling for you" and reveals that she does not want to move to Darwin with her parents. She decides to move into the rundown boarding house Gordon shares with other older alcoholics and down-and-outs.

We become privy to every external feature of their seedy lives: Gordon sitting on a filthy toilet, Cynthia's skin problems, Gordon's asthma, endless close-ups of Cynthia's distorted face as they make love; and lots of nudity, smoking, drinking, and drug taking.

The sharp differences in their personalities, however, soon strain the relationship. Gordon finds himself less

and less able to cope with Cynthia's sexual demands and extroverted behaviour and tries to find a way out of the relationship. The atmosphere in the boarding house becomes increasingly violent and destructive. Gordon's asthma eventually becomes so acute that he is admitted to hospital and told that unless he gives up smoking he will die. The relationship breaks apart after he is released from hospital. The film closes with Gordon back at the boarding house, smoking and drinking but cheerful that his relationship with Cynthia is over.

The issues raised by *Praise* are of obvious importance—human relationships, how two apparently opposite personalities are drawn together, and why, despite the best intentions, some relationships just fall apart. The film, however, is disappointing and curiously uninvolved.

Director Curran captures Cynthia and Gordon's compulsive and self-destructive lifestyle, and the bleak and dreary environment of the boarding house, quite well. He also hints that there is a genuine affection, beyond sex and sharing drinks and drugs, between Gordon and Cynthia. In one of the few sensitive scenes in the movie, Cynthia, self-conscious about her blistered and scarred back, apologetically asks Gordon to scratch it. He does so as tenderly as if it were silk.

Fenton and Horler's performances are adequate, in that they satisfy the requirements of what is a fairly thin script, but the characters they are called on to portray are simplistic, almost cartoonish. Horler's portrayal of Cynthia is overwhelmingly physical and forceful but we don't feel or share her pain. The same can be said of Fenton's Gordon, but from the other extreme. This problem lies with the inability, or refusal, of Curran to seriously explore any of the more interesting contradictions in Gordon and Cynthia's personalities. All the audience receives are the external features of

these two individuals.

Overall *Praise* offers few real challenges. It simply confirms what we already know: that life is difficult for young people; that growing poverty, unemployment and loneliness are reflected in high incidences of alcoholism, drug addiction and suicide. We never feel that we really know them or what has produced the problems in their lives. We never learn why these two people, whose backgrounds are not exactly impoverished—Cynthia's father is in the military and Gordon's family owns rural properties—end up living such aimless, purposeless lives.

Clearly there is a myriad of social problems and issues that a critical artist can and should examine, and the fact that Curran and other young Australian filmmakers are attempting to grapple with the social conditions facing young people is a healthy sign. At least they are not ignoring the issues or producing films that pretend that all is well. Unfortunately, most of the more recent local films, *Praise* included, simply tend to voice their dismay about the harsh conditions confronting young people and then resign themselves, and their audience, to it. And while Curran would probably reject the widespread media and government claims that unemployed young people are lazy hopeless individuals, there is no sign anywhere in *Praise* that he wants to challenge or subvert these retrogressive ideas.

Instead of questioning the underlying source of the problems, or asking how or why this has happened, each film bombards the audience with stark, coarse and vulgar images. There is not an ounce of subtlety or room for pensive reflection and the viewer is left with the feeling that they have just had a bucket of muddy water thrown at them.

This approach to filmmaking, described by some critics as "gritty realism" or "grunge", seems to have grown steadily among Australian filmmakers over the last few years. It generally produces undesired results. It may sound paradoxical but a realistic portrayal of characters and events, which doesn't probe beneath the obvious, can have a desensitising effect. Instead of being emotionally or intellectually confronted, the audience is numbed and then habituated to the social issues raised by the film.

Some of these problems can be put down to inexperience. These weaknesses, however, are also compounded by the tendency of local critics to shower

such films with extravagant tributes. *Praise*, *Kiss or Kill*, *Angel Baby*, *The Boys*, *Idiot Box* and *Head On*, to cite a few recent examples of Australian films that deal with different aspects of the social crisis facing young people, have all been unjustifiably hailed as powerful works. Such praise, even if motivated by an attempt to boost box office success and future filmmaking, works against the creation of a more conscious, probing and self-critical approach by young artists and directors.

Without doubt, the pressure on new filmmakers to be commercially successful in their first project is immense. Those who secure box office success are quickly lured to Hollywood; those who fail are pushed out and quickly replaced from the ready supply of new talent waiting in the wings. In an industry where merit is judged according to financial success or failure, nothing is done to encourage those who want to artistically voice their opposition to the status quo.

Such is the turn around in the Australian industry that 90 of the 163 movies produced over the last five years were made by first-time directors. Many of these filmmakers have been forgotten. The potential of those who may well be capable of creating works that are critical, even subversive, as they gain experience and develop their ideas, is never realised.



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