

Three American films: Sadness, and less

The Limey-Three Kings-Bringing Out the Dead

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The Limey, directed by Steven Soderbergh, written by Lem Dobbs
Three Kings, directed by David O. Russell, written by Russell from a story by John Ridley
Bringing Out the Dead, directed by Martin Scorsese, written by Paul Schrader, based on a book by Joe Connelly

More than anything else, *The Limey* makes me sad. For a number of reasons.

In Steven Soderbergh's film, Terence Stamp plays Wilson, a British ex-convict who travels to Los Angeles to find out the truth about his daughter's suspicious death. Piecing things together, Wilson determines that the young woman's ex-lover, Terry Valentine (Peter Fonda), had a hand in her death, and single-mindedly pursues him. Valentine, a rock and roll promoter, lives in a small palace high in the Hollywood Hills, with a swimming pool that extends out into space. Wilson teams up, more or less, with two of his late daughter's friends, Ed (Luis Guzman), and her former drama coach, Elaine (Lesley Ann Warren).

Soderbergh is a talented director, who has made a number of interesting films (*sex, lies, and videotape*, 1989; *Kafka*, 1991; *King of the Hill*, 1993; *Schizopolis*, 1996). I thought his talent was largely wasted on *Out of Sight* (1998) with George Clooney and Jennifer Lopez. I think it is wasted, to a lesser extent, on *The Limey*.

The film is intelligently and attractively put together. Soderbergh has an uncanny sense for the arrangement and juxtaposition of images. And the film has some bite to it. Valentine is the most fully worked out figure: a leftover from the 1960s' "counterculture," handsome but a little long in the tooth, overextended financially, selfish, dependent on thugs. His new girlfriend tells him, "You're not specific enough to be a person, you're more like a vibe."

Soderbergh also deserves full credit for placing Terence Stamp, one of the great film actors of the past 35 years, once again in the public eye. In one scene we get to see Stamp, after a beating, slither to his feet from a prone position and into the frame as if his body were made of rubber, but with a face set like stone. He's capable of astonishing stuff—above all, intelligence.

Unfortunately, Stamp has taken Wilson more seriously than the filmmakers have. At its heart, there is not enough to his character or the film. Every relationship in *The Limey* hinges on one that we never see or feel in any real sense, between the father and daughter. I think the scriptwriter has set himself an impossible task. We are asked to take on faith the emotional and psychological underpinnings of the events. The spectator may appear to be willing to go along with the pretense that their absence or weakened presence doesn't matter, but both filmmaker and spectator lose something in the bargain. No one feels as deeply as he or she should. (One asks: is the obsession with his daughter plausible? Is it "in character"?) It all remains a little brittle, a little too much on the surface. The film busies itself with secondary matters, with visual tricks and showing off, because it is a bit hollow and unconvincing at the center. Critics and audiences may be satisfied with that, but I think it's settling for

far too little.

The film's associations are fascinating, however, and a little tragic. There is the matter of Stamp's life and career. Born in Stepney in the east end of London in 1939, the son of a tugmaster, Stamp appeared briefly on the stage before making a remarkable film debut in *Billy Budd* (1962, directed by Peter Ustinov). Three years later he played the psychotically repressed kidnapper in William Wyler's *The Collector*. In the course of the following three years he appeared in Joseph Losey's *Modesty Blaise* (1966, with Monica Vitti and Dirk Bogarde); John Schlesinger's *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1967, with Julie Christie); Ken Loach's *Poor Cow* (1967); Federico Fellini's episode in *Spirits of the Dead* (1968, three stories based on Poe tales); and Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Teorema* (1968, one of the most remarkable films of the decade).

Stamp told an interviewer from the *Village Voice* recently: "The roles didn't completely stop [after 1970] but I had been spoiled—I'd worked with Wyler, Losey, Fellini, Pasolini, I was in negotiations with Orson Welles, I'd got accustomed to superleague. When the '60s came to a close, it went from working with the best to making rubbish.... I decided to travel. I bought a round-the-world ticket, thinking some great director would want me sometime, and until then I'll just see the world. I went everywhere. And nobody called. Ten years went by."

Fewer of the type of film Stamp had been accustomed to making were being made. One of the best actors of his generation, Stamp is probably best known to many moviegoers today for his appearances in *Superman* and *Superman II* as the villainous General Zod. He also has a small part in the new *Star Wars* film. I suppose it is possible to read Wilson's pursuit of Valentine as a means by which the filmmakers have metaphorically organized Stamp's revenge on the entertainment industry. I applaud that effort.

In *The Limey* Soderbergh introduces, as flashbacks from Wilson's earlier life, clips of Stamp in the 1967 *Poor Cow*. Loach's film, based on the novel by Nell Dunn, is about a struggling working class couple. The husband is a thief and Stamp plays his gentle best friend, Dave, with whom the wife is really in love.

The fragments from *Poor Cow*, including the concluding one in which Stamp plays the guitar and sings a verse of Donovan's *Colours*, are evocative for a whole set of reasons. It was at that time that a number of British artists and intellectuals, including Loach, were being drawn to the socialist movement. The scenes from *Poor Cow* speak to some of the aspirations, cultural and social, of the time, aspirations which it was not possible, for a host of reasons, to realize at the time. In their own way, they hint at the tragedy of lost beauty and youth and ideals. (Much is made of the associations with Peter Fonda and *Easy Rider*. I think these are less interesting. Fonda is a far better actor today than he was in the 1960s and *Easy Rider* was a fairly silly film.)

But there is something else about the sequences from *Poor Cow*. They show Carol White, who had the leading role. She also starred in two of Loach's better known "Wednesday Plays," *Cathy Come Home* and *Up the*

Junction, both broadcast in 1965. She was a vibrant performer. After appearing in a few more films in England, White moved to Hollywood in the 1970s. She did mostly junk there, including two years of the sophomoric television series *Laverne & Shirley*, roles in a couple of “women-in-prison” movies and, finally, bit parts in *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987), as “Cashier,” *The Fabulous Baker Boys* (1989), as “Bad Singer,” and *Grand Canyon* (1991), as “Morning Nurse.”

A commentator discreetly observes, “Her career wavered, as did her private life...” On September 16, 1991, White was found “hanging from a tree. A note was found.” Genuine tragedy.

I don't know to what extent Soderbergh was conscious of all these associations. In any event, he is someone with the sort of artistic temperament that makes it possible for them to emerge. I remain convinced that he will do something important again.

Three Kings is a film about the Persian Gulf War. Four US soldiers, three enlisted men and an officer, set off after the official end of the war to steal gold that the Iraqi government has looted from Kuwait. In the course of their raid they come upon political opponents of the Saddam Hussein regime. These oppositionists have been abandoned to the mercy of the Hussein forces by the US after assurances of support from George Bush. Should the four Americans continue with their mission to steal the gold or help the oppressed Iraqis?

David O. Russell directed *Three Kings*. He previously made *Spanking the Monkey* (1994), in which incest between mother and son was the most memorable feature, and *Flirting with Disaster* (1996), an occasionally amusing, but somewhat overrated comedy with Ben Stiller, Patricia Arquette and Téa Leoni.

All three films indicate a desire on the director's part to be thought “offbeat.” *Three Kings* is full of black comedy, chaotic and unlikely happenstance, and a certain anti-establishment coloring. Unfortunately, however, Russell's film belongs to the category of works that might be characterized under the heading of Conformist Non-conformism (from *Jerry Maguire* to *American Beauty*). That is to say, films that have their little joke at the expense of the status quo while accepting its more fundamental premises.

Russell takes a few swipes at the military and the media (although these are pretty insipid; he suggests that oil might have been a motive in the war with Iraq; he notes that the US once armed Hussein; he criticizes the Bush administration, as indicated above, for abandoning the Iraqi opposition.)

But this all takes place within the framework of the acceptance, more or less, of the notion that the US is the legitimate liberator of the earth's people. The four Americans are still charged, when all is said and done, with a jazzed-up and somewhat disorderly version of the White Man's Burden. Indeed the film might raise in some minds the possibility that the American military should have marched on Baghdad and helped establish Iraqi “democracy.” It's really awful how shallow political conceptions are in these circles. How and when is that going to change?

In any event, Russell shows some talent and some ingenuity. The acting is fine. Mark Wahlberg continues to be impressive; Ice Cube too. Spike Jonze, when he doesn't lay it on a little thick, is remarkable as a kid from Texas who has a lot to learn. George Clooney is fine too within the limits he or someone has set, i.e., that he must play a character firmly in command at all times.

In Martin Scorsese's *Bringing Out the Dead* Frank Pierce (Nicolas Cage) is a paramedic at work on mid-Manhattan's west side. As part of his job he tends to junkies, prostitutes, the homeless, the old and sick, the dying. Pierce and his partners patrol the filthy streets at night, climbing tenement stairs, navigating alleyways. At the hospital patients choke the corridors. All in all, one tragedy and horror after another.

The film covers three days. Frank has begun to see ghosts, specters of patients he's lost on the street. In particular, a young prostitute. He is on the verge of a nervous breakdown. In fact, everyone's going crazy. Frank

tries to quit, tries to get fired, but has no luck. Each of the three nights he goes out with a different partner, each with his particular idiosyncrasies. He meets and develops feelings for a young woman, Mary (Patricia Arquette), whose father he's resuscitated. In the end, he seems to come to terms with what's haunting him, at least for the time being.

The most revealing moment in *Bringing Out the Dead* takes place before the story begins. A message is flashed on the screen indicating that the events in the film take place in the early 1990s. No doubt the novel on which the film is based was set at that time. The clear implication, however, is that some of the ghastliness we are about to witness has been eliminated under the administration of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. Nothing could do more to undermine one's confidence in the seriousness of Scorsese's purpose.

When you remove the orchestrated chaos, the bombast, the sound track, the graphic and bloody details, there's not much left of *Bringing Out the Dead*. Whenever the film slows down long enough to permit a conversation, it nearly stops breathing. Very little goes on between Frank and Mary. They chat and smoke cigarettes, and say next to nothing to one another. Character and story have never been Scorsese's strong suit, or script writer Paul Schrader's.

Scorsese and Schrader have created an inferno on the west side of Manhattan (a reprise of their effort in *Taxi Driver*). It is the kind of caricature, frankly, that feeds the fears and prejudices of those who are convinced that big city immorality is leading to the breakdown of civilization as we know it. If the city were truly like this (or *simply* like this), residents would be entitled to slit their wrists en masse. In any case, the notion that anything might be done about these social ills is excluded at the outset, as is any anger at those forces that profit from the misery. One might reasonably conclude that the poor and the wretched have brought the situation on themselves.

The ultimate message of the film is a complacent one, or worse. In the end, the ghost that has been haunting Frank tells him that the situation is not his fault and that he should quit acting like a martyr. Frank is a man with a conscience, but what might a lesser creature draw from Scorsese's film? (And there are such creatures—in New York too, for example) “Nothing can be done (anyway, Giuliani's apparently doing whatever needs to be done), it's not my fault, leave me alone.” This is not the sort of response Scorsese is after, but his own confusion and superficiality, deepened by celebrity status and wealth, have led him to evoke it.



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