A worried face is not enough

Girl, Interrupted

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Girl, Interrupted, *directed by James Mangold; screenplay by Mangold, Lisa Loomer and Anna Hamilton Phelan; based on the book by Susanna Kaysen*

James Mangold's film is based on Susanna Kaysen's account of her nearly two-year stay at a private psychiatric hospital in suburban Boston during the late 1960s.

Susanna (Winona Ryder) is obviously unhappy and confused, and has made a halfhearted attempt at suicide, so her concerned, well-heeled parents have her admitted as a patient to Claymoore Hospital. There she meets a number of other girls or young women who have perhaps more serious problems: Lisa (Angelina Jolie), a charismatic figure who lashes out at everyone and everything; Daisy (Brittany Murphy), the self-deluding casualty of an incestuous relationship; Georgina (Clea Duvall), who lives in a fantasy world based on the Wizard of Oz books; Polly (Elizabeth Moss), a burn victim, frozen in perpetual childhood. In addition, Susanna comes into close contact with Valerie (Whoopi Goldberg), a ward nurse, and the institution's chief psychiatrist, Dr. Wick (Vanessa Redgrave).

Mangold and his co-screenwriters have obviously felt the need to impose a rather contrived "beginning, middle and end" on episodic material. The dramatic incidents primarily involve Susanna and Lisa: their first encounter, frightening for Susanna; the women's midnight break-in of their psychiatrist's office, during which Lisa hands out all their files for them to read; an escape from the hospital by Susanna and Lisa, which ends in tragedy for Daisy; a final confrontation between the two, clearly headed down different paths.

It's difficult to examine sanity, madness and psychiatry in any depth if you accept relatively uncritically the existing state of things. Mangold's film tends to adopt two different attitudes toward emotional difficulties: either they're something more or less accidental, a bump on the road toward a "normal life," a self-indulgence you "snap out of" when you're ready to (Susanna); or they result from a fatal weakness in the personality, a surrender to perhaps particularly difficult circumstances, a decision to live in a "parallel universe" (the others).

In any event, an individual choice. This helps explain the film's moralizing tone. Inadvertently, the filmmakers have subscribed to the prevailing view that society is made up of free-floating atoms who do nothing but exercise or fail to exercise individual responsibility. "Ultimately," the film's production notes suggest, "Susanna must choose between the world of those who belong on the inside of the institution and the often difficult world of reality on the outside."

To a certain extent the film's creators want to have it both ways. Mangold explains: "'Crazy' is measured by our adherence to what society expects us to do, how we're supposed to dress, how we're supposed to interact, how I'm supposed to answer your questions ... what's appropriate. In many ways our sanity is determined by our commitment to playing by the rules." But his collaborator, producer Cathy Konrad, finishes the thought, crediting Mangold with a "good mode of how to navigate the screenplay. It was how we could identify Susanna as a girl trying to find her way back home, her way back into life ..."

This sort of outlook, flirtation with rebellion followed by thorough-going acceptance of the status quo, is reflected in the structure of the film. It begins with jibes at the first psychiatrist Susanna encounters, a friend of her parents. Her initial therapist at Claymoore is also something of a figure of fun. When the women get hold of their files and Susanna discovers she's been diagnosed as suffering from "Borderline Personality Disorder," she looks up a definition of the condition. The latter, it turns out, is "manifested by uncertainty about self-image, long-term goals, types of friends or lovers to have, and which values to adopt." "That's me," she says. "That's *everybody*," Lisa pointedly responds. In her first interview with Dr. Wick, Susanna quite rightly ridicules the notion of her "promiscuity."

These critical notes in the film, however, eventually disappear. Susanna's defiance crumbles under the benevolent eye of Dr. Wick in particular. (It has to be said that in proportion as Vanessa Redgrave becomes less and less significant as a political figure, she grows in self-seriousness

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as a performer. Her oracular “rightness” is so absolute and dictatorial, given a certain kind of part, as to be positively suffocating.) Presumably the spectator is to be pleased at Susanna's growing recognition that she doesn't belong with the others, that she can find a place in society.

It's perfectly legitimate to wish her well, but the film essentially ends in the same spot as it began, having explained very little about her condition, or that of Lisa or anyone else. Mangold is content not to understand anything. It “was really exciting,” he comments, that Susanna Kaysen never figured out what was making her so unhappy. “It suggests a person can find themselves in a wasteland of confusion and, even after years of therapy and ‘recovery,' remain unclear as to how they got there.” It's true, as he says, that there is “no simple answer,” but might there not be a complicated one?

In any event, there is another possible view of sanity and insanity: that people are not isolated individuals, but exist in a variety of economic and social relationships which they have not chosen, and that madness is essentially a social problem. According to that conception, the present irrational organization of society plays a great part in making most people unhappy; and driving the especially vulnerable into madness.

This is not a view currently in favor. When reaction rages within the upper echelons of society and dominates all the mass means of communication, as it does presently, retrograde ideas will tend to filter into the work of all but the most conscious and vigilant artists. This is particularly true for those working in the American film industry, where the pressures to toe the line are immense, if not always explicitly spelled out.

In other words, the confusion and muddle-headedness of the filmmakers, given the ideological pressures bearing down on them, probably land them in places they didn't want to go. For all Mangold's talk about the value of going “crazy”—in moderation of course—the film, in the end, preaches a fairly deadly conformism. Susanna, after rejecting her draft-dodging boyfriend, learns the value of submitting to the institution's guidance; Lisa, on the other hand, continually revolts and pays the price: she ends up strapped down to a bed, heavily sedated, a pathetic, beaten figure. Whatever Mangold's intention, the lesson is clear. There is an unpleasant hint of Robert Zemeckis' *Forrest Gump* here, even to both films' treatment of the 1960s. Radicalism and revolt, or simply sticking your neck out, are identified with insanity, disease or death.

Susanna Kaysen's book obviously struck a chord with readers when it was published in 1993. The increasing suicide rate among the young, depression, drug use, eating and other kinds of disorders—all these problems are matters of widespread concern. Many people are trying to figure out the source of their own or others' discontent and desperation. A sensitive depiction of the problem is always welcome.

The film was in part a personal project of actress Winona Ryder, taking six years to reach the screen. Her seriousness about the work is evident. Ryder discusses her first meeting with author Susanna Kaysen: “I just didn't want her to think that I was some shallow, bouncy movie star who was going to somehow trivialize this huge thing in her life that she wrote about. I so respected and related to what she wrote. I just was afraid that I might say something that sounded insincere.”

These feelings are legitimate, but good intentions and the elementary desire to do something out of the mainstream may not be enough. The filmmakers resort to formulas, softened edges, clichés. *Girl, Interrupted* seems very long. It appears that Mangold wants to address the problems of those society considers “losers” (*Heavy*, 1995; *Cop Land*, 1997), but the results so far have been rather flaccid and mediocre.

Jolie (the daughter of actor Jon Voight) is at times a riveting performer. Ryder has demonstrated that quality in other works. Here the director is content too often to train his camera on her in close-up, in the hope apparently that this will provide the film with the expressiveness it otherwise generally lacks. What one remembers most about *Girl, Interrupted*, unhappily, are not necessarily the dramas going on around her, but Winona Ryder observing them with large, anxious eyes. At some point the more sensitive, intelligent personalities in Hollywood will grasp the unsettling fact that a sincere and worried expression is not enough.

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