

Shouting but not saying much—Requiem for a Dream

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Requiem for a Dream, directed by Darren Aronofsky, screenplay by Hubert Selby, Jr. and Darren Aronofsky, adapted from the novel by Hubert Selby, Jr.

As a rule, screaming at the top of one's lungs, even about genuine injustices and human difficulties, is not an effective method of reaching people. That is the tone of Darren Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream*. In this Aronofsky (*Pi*, 1998) is not being untrue to the 1978 novel by Hubert Selby, Jr. on which the film is based. Unhappily, Aronofsky is all too faithful to the spirit of the Selby original.

The story involves four people living in the Coney Island section in Brooklyn, New York. Sara Goldfarb (Ellen Burstyn) is a lonely widow who lives for television and game shows in particular. Believing that she has been chosen as a contestant on her favorite program, Sara makes various attempts to lose weight, which eventually result in her addiction to diet pills and a mental collapse. Her son Harry (Jared Leto), his girlfriend Marion (Jennifer Connelly) and friend Tyrone (Marlon Wayans) are all junkies. They devise various means of getting high and getting rich, all of which lead to catastrophe.

Aronofsky says: "One of the things this film is about is the hole we create in our present when we chase the illusion of tomorrow and then the distances we go to fill that vacuum with anything and everything."

Says Selby: "The dream I'm referring to in the book, of course, is the great American dream: prosperity, property, prestige, etc. And the fact that it'll kill you dead. Striving for it is a disaster. Attaining it is a killer."

Selby, of course, has been something of a cult figure ever since the publication of *Last Exit to Brooklyn* in 1964. He has four other novels, including *Requiem for a Dream*, and a volume of short stories to his credit.

The writer was born in Brooklyn in 1928. After leaving school at the age of 15, he went to sea. Selby had various physical and emotional problems over the next several decades and spent years as an addict. He's lived in Los Angeles for the past 30 years.

In certain quarters, particularly in Europe, the novelist is considered an unrecognized genius. There are many things wrong with America, but the neglect of Hubert Selby, Jr. is not chief among them.

Selby writes in an overheated prose about people who are fairly well destroyed by the time we meet them. His specialty is lovingly detailing the disasters they undergo. He is not a charlatan or a poseur, but an inadequate writer and artist and thinker. The destinies of his wretched characters are so obviously preordained that any real drama or spontaneity is largely drained away. We're watching cattle being slaughtered. Selby's own authorial stance seems to vary: as one of the cattle, he exudes a vague, but palpable sense of self-pity; as one of the horrified observers, a sense of superiority. It is never entirely clear whether the author is protesting against the terrible things that are done to people or registering his disgust with the mutilated, self-deluded population itself. At all points, he fails to bring out the mainspring, the secret of their behavior.

Aronofsky's film manifests a similar ambiguity. It's hard to work up much sympathy for this group of individuals. Marion and Harry have their moments, and Connelly and Leto are attractive, engaging performers, but watching addicts perpetually succumbing to their addiction is a predictable and ultimately fatiguing activity. We know they'll screw everything up, and there is not even much suspense about how they'll do it.

Almost entirely absent is any sense of the pressures, economic and psychological, that might drive people to seek relief in drugs. The film "updates" the dialog to

the present day, but the events could take place in the 1950s or the 1980s. To a certain extent no doubt the drug netherworld has that floating, timeless quality, at least to its participants, but it might have been the artist's responsibility to render it more concrete. There's no reason to accept what the characters see and think of themselves as the last word on the matter. Insofar as Aronofsky fails to create any distance between himself and his protagonists, which might have enabled him to make their irrational behavior rational, the spectator will tend to fault the individuals and not the world they live in. Sara Goldfarb simply becomes grotesque as she falls apart, almost a figure of ridicule.

The film's essential hysteria and sensationalism reach extraordinary heights. In one of its concluding sequences, one character (Sara) is undergoing electroshock treatment, another (Marion) is forced to perform sexual acts before a crazed crowd (in exchange for drugs) and a third (Harry) is having his infected arm amputated in a prison hospital—simultaneously! It's overloaded, absurd and unconvincing. If Aronofsky is genuinely distressed by the misery in the world, and not simply attempting to construct a career out of it, he needs to take another tack.



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