

# Some recent films—The Deep End, The Others, Down From the Mountain, Planet of the Apes, Legally Blonde

David Walsh  
6 September 2001

*The Deep End* concerns a middle class woman who covers up what she believes to have been the murder committed by her teenage son of his gay lover and sets off a series of tragic events. The 1947 novel on which the film is loosely based, Elisabeth S. Holding's *The Blank Wall*, also inspired *The Reckless Moment* (1949) directed by Max Ophuls. ["The pleasure of seeing should be the moving force" A selection of Max Ophuls films]

The woman in question, Margaret Hall (Tilda Swinton), leads a conventional existence with her three children and her father-in-law. Her husband is in the navy, away at sea and out of reach. When the corpse of the man she has demanded stop seeing her son turns up by her lakeside dock, Margaret disposes of it. A blackmailer, Alek (Goran Visnjic), eventually appears at her house with a tape of her son having sex with the dead man, and threatens to go to the police if she does not come up with \$50,000. One thing leads to another. The blackmailer turns out to have a compassionate side to his nature, but his partner does not.

A certain amount of effort has gone into the work. Co-writers, directors and producers Scott McGehee and David Siegel have striven consciously, or perhaps self-consciously, to create a stylish film. *The Deep End*, set in Lake Tahoe on the California-Nevada border, has a studied and elegant look. Swinton and Visnjic are restrained as the woman in question and the blackmailer who eventually besets her, respectively. The film, however, is essentially empty. The blackmailer's "conversion" is unconvincing and the relationship of the two leading protagonists unmoving.

The filmmakers make the same mistake as many others. They believe that they can recreate the depth of emotion found in some 1940s melodramas by reproducing or reinventing a certain set of narrative devices and by clever

casting and design work. This is enough for most critics, of course, who characterize the work as "mesmerizing." It is not, it is more fool's gold.

This seems to be the point: Margaret interferes in her son's life, mistrusts him and responds with displeasure to the possibility of his homosexuality. Through the calamitous events that befall her, she comes to understand that there are "more things in heaven and earth" than her comfortable bourgeois existence has allowed for. Presumably she will be more accepting.

This theme is built up in a number of ways. There are obvious parallels established between mother and son (both have dealings with and fall for seedy characters, both have to hide their relationships, both reply to inquiries about these characters, "Oh he's just a friend," both get bruised faces for their efforts, etc.) The notion of gender role reversal is played with, not all that subtly: Margaret's husband is suggestively in the navy; her daughter, who studies ballet, is an aspiring car mechanic. That the film is situated on the border of two states between which the characters constantly travel, one supposes, has a certain significance.

The issue of being allowed to express one's sexuality freely is legitimate and important. However, this is something that has to be fought for against the existing society as part of a larger social struggle and not pursued as a personal vendetta against unaccepting or unsympathetic parents. *The Deep End* fails because its theme is petty and cannot support the weight of real passion or tragedy.

*The Others*, directed by Chilean Alejandro Amenábar, although it has a quite different intellectual driving force, has this much in common with *The Deep End*: it is stylishly done and one forgets about it in an unhappily short period of time.

A woman named Grace (Nicole Kidman) lives in a strangely deserted mansion with her two children on Jersey, in the Channel Islands. Her husband is away at war (World War II). Grace, a devout Catholic, rules her children's lives with an iron hand. The latter suffer from a strange disease—they cannot be exposed to sunlight, so the rooms must be kept curtained and dark. Two women and a man mysteriously appear and offer their services as hired help. Things go bump in the night. The daughter sees ghosts, or something like them. The older female servant explains that sometimes the living and the dead get mixed up. A tragic secret is revealed.

Amenábar's work is somber and intelligent, but, again, to what end? There may be religious or spiritual meaning in the interplay of dark and light and other matters, but one is not convinced that anything terribly interesting or enduring is going on.

*Down From the Mountain* is a documentary work by D.A. Pennebaker, Chris Hegedus and Nick Doob. It records a concert held in May 2000 at the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville, Tennessee in connection with the Coen Brothers' film, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Many of the performers heard on the film's popular soundtrack are present. Included are John Hartford (who sadly died three months ago), Emmy Lou Harris, Gillian Welch and David Rawlings, Chris Thomas King, Alison Krauss, Ralph Stanley, and some remarkable groups: the Fairfield Four (which mysteriously has five members), the Cox Family, the adorable Peasall Sisters and others. The music is "traditional," blue grass, country, blues, gospel. And much of it is lovely.

Pennebaker (*Dont Look Back*, 1967—the film account of Bob Dylan's 1965 British tour; *One P.M.*, 1972—with Jean-Luc Godard—and many others) is a renowned documentarian., along with his partner Chris Hegedus. [Pennebaker and Hegedus: seminal figures in American documentary film] *Down From the Mountain* has their touch—one is thrown into the midst of the event and has to sort out who's who and what's what on one's own. It works well here, in the chaos of milling performers. I don't know that the few opening shots of coal mines and Appalachian countryside contribute that much by way of explaining the music's power, but it is at least suggestive.

If one has reservations at all, it concerns the content of the music. As with *Songcatcher* [Career opportunities], Maggie Greenwald's film about "mountain music," the choices here seem somewhat distorted. In Greenwald's version, the history of traditional music was largely restricted to women singing about the perfidy of men. In

this case, religious themes seem to dominate one-sidedly. Such a strain in the music obviously exists, among both ex-slaves and in the Appalachian and other Southern communities, but people sang about other things too: injustice, the crimes of the rich against the poor, drinking, cheating and other "secular" problems. There is some of that in *Down From the Mountain*, but on the whole the music is a bit too reverential and uplifting for my taste. One has the feeling, however, that contemporary ideological confusion, rather than anyone's conscious manipulation, is at work in this.

*Planet of the Apes* confirms one's long-held suspicion, that Tim Burton is a vastly overrated film director. The "re-imagining" of the 1968 original—a fairly silly film to begin with, about a human being stranded on a planet where apes rule and men and woman are slaves—is no improvement. The default setting of contemporary filmmakers is to paint human society in the darkest possible colors. They don't really think about the matter, it is simply easier to insert violence and cold-heartedness than genuine contradiction and complexity. "Everyone agrees" that mankind is pretty rotten. Here the ape world is portrayed in that manner, but the implication is clear, especially when the filmmakers moralize in an empty-headed manner about the apes' racism and cruelty. Mark Wahlberg is a fine actor, but he had better stop doing rubbish, or his acting will turn to rubbish.

*Legally Blonde* is a dreadful film about a blonde cheerleader who gets into Harvard Law School to be near her boyfriend and proceeds to teach everyone there that you don't have to be smart, merely enthusiastic and hardworking, to succeed in life. Reese Witherspoon is another fine performer who needs to watch out for her soul. This is a reworking of the anti-intellectual *Forrest Gump* theme—is this a surreptitious attempt to "explain" how so many stupid people became very rich in America in recent decades?—and it is no more appealing.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**