

Passive realism

In the Bedroom, directed by Todd Field

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In the Bedroom, directed by Todd Field, written by Field and Robert Festinger, based on a story by Andre Dubus

“If the experiences of Uncle Vanya have lost a little of their freshness—and this sin has actually taken place—it is none the less true that Uncle Vanya is not the only one with an inner life”—Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*

Matt and Ruth Fowler (Tom Wilkinson and Sissy Spacek) are a middle class couple living in a community on the Maine seacoast. Their son Frank, (Nick Stahl) with an apparently promising career as an architect ahead of him, is dallying in a summertime romance with a somewhat older woman, Natalie (Marisa Tomei), who is in the process of getting divorced. Her husband Richard (William Mapother) is the son of the local canning plant owner.

Ruth is disapproving of her son’s liaison, while Matt seems quite taken with Natalie and to be living vicariously through his son’s affair. Tragedy strikes when the obviously unbalanced Richard shoots Frank in a jealous rage. Since there are no eyewitnesses to the killing and Richard claims it was an accident, he may get off with only a few years in jail. Grief-stricken and enraged, Matt and Ruth take matters into their own hands and carry out the killing of their son’s murderer.

The film is based on a short story by Andre Dubus (1936-99), entitled “Killings.” Todd Field, the director, has primarily worked as actor, most notably in *Ruby in Paradise* (Victor Nunez) and *Eyes Wide Shut* (Stanley Kubrick). Field has obviously put a good deal of time and effort into *In the Bedroom*. The work is sensitively and intelligently done. Its strongest moment—and it is entirely to the filmmaker’s credit—occurs when Matt is preparing to kill his son’s murderer. Richard, a monster in the eyes of the Fowlers and our eyes until this point, suddenly appears before us as a terribly weak and vulnerable human being, an object of pity more than anything else.

Such a moment *objectively* strikes a blow against all the law-and-order, death-penalty hysteria with which the US population is bombarded on a daily basis. And that means a good deal.

In general, *In the Bedroom*’s characters are recognizable as human beings and their actions recognizable as human actions. That is saying something these days. It is understandable why there has been a generally favorable response to the film.

In my view, however, this is a very limited work as a whole, despite the sincerity and hard work of its creators and its individually valuable moments. In the first place, it seems reasonable to question whether the actions of Matt and Ruth are thoroughly convincing. They plot Richard’s death prior to a trial, prior to the exhaustion of the legal procedures. Is it likely that such “civilized” social types would act in this precipitous manner? We are witnesses to scenes in which their anger and frustration surface, presumably to demonstrate the emotional extremes and even madness of which they might be capable. There is nonetheless a considerable gulf between berating your spouse for real or imagined sins and murdering a man in cold blood.

Stephen Holden in the *New York Times* commented that the film’s “final disquieting message suggests that middle-class gentility is only a thin veneer that circumstances can strip away.... The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon left many Americans who had previously considered themselves gentle, nonviolent sorts unapologetically thirsting for an eye-for-an-eye retaliation.”

As to the second point, Holden should perhaps speak for himself. This is a rather revealing and damning admission, but it’s not clear what connection this has to *In the Bedroom*. If the film were, for example, a critical examination of the violence that many “liberal” upper middle class people are capable of when it comes to the defense of their property and wealth, or how such types

have swung around to social views previously unthinkable, it would be entirely welcome. It is not that.

If the first part of Holden's comment is correct, and I'm afraid that it is, we have landed in the rather tedious territory of *Lord of the Flies* or what have you: under the thin veneer of civilization, we are all murderous animals tugging at the leash. Whether those who advance such ideas are aware of it or not, their underlying premise is that tampering with the social order is pointless, because our murderous animal nature will always out.

Field is probably not even that ambitious. Presumably he means to demonstrate that the repression which these polite and genteel people have practiced on themselves and their emotions, all that they have held in, will take its toll at a moment of extraordinary and cruel stress. Yes, and ...?

This school of art doesn't take one very far, it seems to me. *In the Bedroom* establishes (or semi-establishes) that even the most refined and "caring" individuals will commit terrible, inhuman crimes if they are pushed toward or over the emotional brink. Is that something we didn't know? And once we know it, where does it take us?

In the Bedroom seems to me one of the extensions into cinema of the modern "little" short story, a not entirely welcome trend. That is, the short story whose style and structure are more or less meant to convey the following to the reader: "Listen, one can't make anything of this world as a whole, that project is too vast and, anyway, misguided. Detail is everything. That's all we know and can ever know. Everything else is a mystery and must remain a mystery." This is one of the equivalents in the sphere of aesthetic responses of the argument against "grand narratives" and in favor of the "microcosmic."

There is something unnatural about this approach; after all, the greatest artists have made an effort, however they organized or materialized it, to make sense of life and society. This self-limiting minimalism seems to make so many concessions even before it begins. There is something timid and cautious about this manner of working, betraying a lack of self-confidence in one's ability to cognize reality and gain a "big picture" that must have social and ideological roots.

For this reason and others, there is a somewhat stilted quality to *In the Bedroom*, despite generally fine performances by all the actors. It is one of those films that seems to be working backward. The filmmaker wants to demonstrate something about this couple and most of the details feel as though they had been carefully arranged to

prove a point. The work lacks spontaneity and freshness. The spectator feels that he is being pulled by not-so-invisible strings toward some inevitable denouement from the opening shots. And it is a denouement that seems to reveal relatively little.

In the Bedroom falls too easily into the category of contemplative, passive realism. There is no element of protest here, no desire to shape life. The filmmaker has identified certain human qualities accurately enough, but makes too little of them.

Field's film has been compared to Sam Raimi's *A Simple Plan* by critics, but I think the latter work is superior. *A Simple Plan*, although hardly flawless, truly gave one the flavor of what life in America is like at present for so many people, cut off from traditional allegiances and affiliations, morally and psychologically at sea and left to their own devices. The weakness of *In the Bedroom* is its "timelessness," in the unfortunate sense; it could have been made 20 or 50 years ago. Its focus is not on the changes in North American life, but rather on fairly banal lowest common denominators; it lacks a historical sensitivity. It has more in common with *You Can Count on Me* (Kenneth Lonergan) or the considerably weaker *The Sweet Hereafter* (Atom Egoyan).

On the basis of having seen the film many years ago, I placed Jean-Luc Godard's *Band of Outsiders* (1964)—which was re-released this year—on my list of favorite films available in North America in 2001. That was an error. A recent viewing of the film reveals it to be trivial, pleased with itself and mildly irritating. The famous dance sequence and the black-and-white photography of Paris hold up, but little else does.

One must say that the truly valuable films to Godard's credit are relatively few in number: *Vivre Sa Vie*, *Contempt*, *A Married Woman*, *Alphaville*, *Pierrot le Fou*, *La Chinoise*, *Weekend* and perhaps one or two others. A serious, i.e., *critical*, reevaluation of his work is overdue. It becomes less and less certain that the French New Wave made a startling contribution to film and art. The reasons for the overestimation of this contribution and for all the mythology that surrounds these filmmakers need to be worked out.



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