Four recent films

Bandits; Ghost World; Monster's Ball; Vanilla Sky

David Walsh
5 January 2002

Bandits, directed by Barry Levinson; *Ghost World*, directed by Terry Zwigoff; *Monster's Ball*, directed by Marc Foster; *Vanilla Sky*, directed by Cameron Crowe

"Ah yes, but you can't upbraid someone for what he hasn't done ... or can you?" - R.W. Fassbinder

Bandits, a comic story of bank robbers, is a small blow for non-conformism directed by veteran American filmmaker Barry Levinson. Two inmates (Bruce Willis and Billy Bob Thornton) escape from prison more or less on the spur of the moment and undertake a string of robberies. They develop a distinctive method of carrying out their crimes—intruding on a bank manager and family the night before a heist, staying over at his or her house and having the said manager open the vault for them in the morning—and become known as the "Sleepover Bandits." When a bored and frustrated housewife (Cate Blanchett) stumbles into their hideout, she too becomes a member of the gang. The two men fall for her and she for both of them. Between them, she reckons, they make one perfect man.

Bandits is commendable primarily for one reason: its protagonists are not generals or admirals, Navy Seals, Green Berets, marine commandos, FBI or CIA agents, state troopers or municipal police officers, sheriffs or deputy sheriffs, prison wardens or guards, secret service or Treasury agents, customs inspectors, immigration investigators, federal marshals, judges, bailiffs, parole or probation officers, Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms inspectors, Internal Revenue criminal investigators, Fish and Wildlife Service special agents, or any other fictional representatives of law enforcement, who so dominate television and movie screens at present. One must thank heaven for small mercies in these disastrously conformist times. Not only that, the three crooks get away with their crimes and end up in illicit bliss, as a threesome no less, on some island paradise.

It's something ... but not enough. The film is slighter than it needs to be. Blanchett is charming, Thornton, as a hypochondriacal and generally obsessive personality, is amusing. Willis, who used to be a good actor, seems out of place. He appears stuck in his "action hero" mode to the detriment of the comic business being attempted here.

Levinson is one of those directors who might have done truly interesting work in a more stimulating cultural and social environment. (I suppose that is something of a truism. Who wouldn't have done better under such conditions? Certain cases stand out, however.) He has decent instincts, but lacks sharpness and real depth. Even in his best work there is a trace or more of philistinism. Obviously possessed of a humane and sensitive temperament, Levinson is hostile to racism and anti-Semitism and to the cynicism and corruption of the political establishment. *Rain Man*, with its study of modern-day Babbitry, could be seen as a critique of Reaganism, *Wag the Dog* cleverly commented on the manufacture of public opinion by the media and the political elite. His Baltimore films (*Diner*, *Tin Men*, *Avalon*, *Liberty Heights*) contain certain insights and pleasures, but also a good deal of quasi-patriotic nostalgia and complacency.

A defining moment may have come early in his directing career when Levinson, along with Robert Redford, decided to slap on an absurd and heroic ending to Bernard Malamud's *The Natural*, making the film something of a travesty. At the decisive moments the watchword has always seemed to be: nothing too painful, contradictory or critical. Reading interviews conducted with Levinson one is made aware of his amiability, but a more striking feature, unhappily, is the conventional and unremarkable character of his thinking and opinions.

I assume that *Bandits* is a conscious effort at non-conformism, but it is too small by half. All in all, Levinson is simply too comfortable and pleased with things to cut his way to the more essential questions.

Terry Zwigoff directed *Crumb* (1994), the documentary about the cartoonist Robert Crumb and his remarkable, unhappy brothers (one of whom has since committed suicide). As a portrait of a dysfunctional American family *Crumb* struck a chord. His fiction film, *Ghost World* (based on a graphic novel), comes as a disappointment.

Two Los Angeles high school graduates, Enid (Thora Birch) and Rebecca (Scarlet Johansson), decide not to attend college like their classmates, preferring something less conventional. But what exactly? They seem to aspire to a counterculture, but a campy and fashion-conscious (and toothless) counterculture. They spend the majority of their time sneering at everyone with whom they come into contact. The two girls encounter a middle-aged man, Seymour (Steve Buscemi), a traditional music record collector and semi-recluse ("I can't relate to 99 percent of humanity"), through a nasty trick they play, and Enid develops a crush on him. She decides to help him get a girl-friend, commenting, "Maybe I just can't stand the thought of a world where a guy like you can't get a date." Complications inevitably ensue. Meanwhile the friendship between the girls dissolves as Rebecca chooses a "sensible" path in life, much to Enid's disgust.

In a world of imitation and kitsch, is Enid attracted (in Seymour and his 78s) to a hint of authenticity? Perhaps. One can't be sure. The film suffers from a false kind of objectivity, an unconvincing even-handedness. Is this a film about the universal problems of adolescence or a social commentary? It's too culturally specific to be the former and not acute enough to be the latter. The filmmaker appears to lack an independent position of his own or any clearly worked out ideas about the world. The dramatic result is simply flat, by and large, and

dull. The attempts at satire—for example, the portrait of Enid's summer school art teacher, a bundle of smarmy, liberal concern—are neither amusing nor penetrating because there is no genuine social insight at their heart.

Presumably the filmmaker is critical of his character's air of superiority, born of adolescent defensiveness and insecurity, but too often he joins in with his own and less excusable brand of sneering. *Ghost World* mocks most of its characters—including an immigrant storeowner—and their activities, without ever establishing the Olympian credentials of the filmmakers.

What sort of compassion is it that can only be extended to one or perhaps two characters, at the expense of nearly everyone else? The film's title brings to mind a quote from the German novelist Theodor Fontane, who had a far more serious attitude toward human specters: "Every debt must be paid on this earth, even that of showing shadows or half-shadows as human beings."

Monster's Ball is an earnest and overwrought drama set in the South. For generations apparently the Grotowskis have been prison guards. Buck Grotowski (Peter Boyle), now retired, is an unrepentant racist. His son Hank (Billy Bob Thornton), the film's central figure, is an angry, tormented man and father, in turn, to the sensitive Sonny (Heath Ledger). When Sonny shows weakness during the execution of a black prisoner (Sean Combs), Hank turns on him violently. The confrontation continues the following day. "You've always hated me, haven't you?" asks Sonny. "Yes, I have," says Hank, prompting his son to shoot himself. The reaction seems a little extreme. One doesn't want to be flippant, but Sonny would have been better off simply moving out.

In any event, the unlikely incidents continue to pile up. Sonny's death presumably obliges Hank to undergo a process of self-examination and self-criticism. He changes rather dramatically, befriending his black neighbor (who he had previously berated) and eventually the widow (Halle Berry) of the executed man, who has also recently lost her son. They end up together. Even the woman's discovery that Hank participated in her husband's execution, and hadn't told her, cannot dampen her feelings. The film runs the risk of becoming the thinking man's *The Green Mile*.

The theme here concerns redemption and reconciliation, but the transformation is all too remarkable and effortless. Frankly, this is a fantasy. If violence and personal tragedy, of which there has been no shortage on this planet, could bring about such changes by themselves, why has universal brotherhood so far failed to reign on earth? That capital punishment, prisons, crime, poverty and racism are social phenomena, rooted in certain social and historical conditions, which can only be overcome by an organized, social response ... this seems a closed book to the filmmakers. They prefer to see a world of free-floating atoms, individuals simply making individual moral decisions. Unbeknownst to the filmmakers, whose hostility to much of what is currently going in the US is no doubt entirely sincere, they have (perhaps passively) accepted the theory of "individual responsibility," which largely absolves the social order of its crimes and ills.

The acting is exceptional in general, but then it would have to be to make such a preposterous story believable to an audience. Thornton in particular has to perform contortions, in his distinctly low-key manner, to keep his character's behavior anywhere near the bounds of the credible. The German dramatist and theoretician Bertolt Brecht was wrong about many things, but not about this sort of problem. He might have been referring to Thornton's work in the present case when he described an acting performance as "more of a matter of coating a sham with as much truth as possible."

Vanilla Sky is a terrible film, about which the less said the better. Director and writer Cameron Crowe has been some kind of lowest common denominator of American filmmaking. Until now his films were not good (*Jerry Maguire*, *Almost Famous*), but they were not absurd. *Vanilla Sky*, a remake of a Spanish film, *Abre los ojos* (1997), is about a wealthy playboy publisher, whose dabblings with women lead to tragedy. One in particular takes offense to his dealings with her and drives the two of them off a bridge in her car. She dies; he survives, disfigured. Other things happen: plastic surgery, a murder or maybe not, hallucinations or maybe not, and then science fiction-like bits and pieces.

There are perhaps two minutes of interest in the film, the rest is filled up with tedious and trite musings, along these general thematic lines: It's the small things that count, Without the sour, you can't appreciate the sweet, Money isn't everything, Life is preferable to fantasy, and so on. Most of the audience with whom I saw the film seemed as stupefied and astonished as I was by the dullness of the proceedings.

Tom Cruise and Cameron Diaz throw themselves about trying to make things interesting, without the slightest success, but at least they seem to be aware that the project is a sinking ship and needs help. Dishearteningly, Penelope Cruz (who also had a role in the original Spanish version) appears oblivious. She has been told, one senses, that when she tosses her hair around, or covers half her face with it, or simply shows up on screen, she is irresistible and that seems enough for her to go on. It really isn't, as a matter of fact. Talent, tact, intelligence also help.

A frightening aspect of *Vanilla Sky* is that Crowe apparently has in mind paying tribute to Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*. A number of elements make this clear: a wealthy publisher as a central figure; the nickname by which Cruise's character is known behind his back; a recalcitrant board of directors; a close friend with whom the publisher eventually breaks, etc. More generally, the notion that the lead character could have been great but for his riches.

This is a strange phenomenon and not uncommon these days. Jane Campion compared *The Piano* to Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, not nearly as inappropriate an amalgamation, but still considerably out of line. The contemporary petty bourgeois intellectual or semi-intellectual feels the pull of the "classical" work, seeks to reproduce it and even imagines in a fit of delusion of grandeur that he or she has, but instead inevitably creates something in keeping with his or her surroundings, background and outlook, something petty, self-absorbed and trivial.