

Letters from readers on the arts

30 July 2002

On Road to Perdition

Dear Joanne,

Great review of *Road to Perdition*. I was actually thinking of going to see this film, even though the Cult of Tom Hanks frankly makes me ill. Now I will be spared the ordeal.

I suspected, when I was reading articles about this film and interviews with Hanks, Mendes, Newman, et al., that it would be less than faithful to the period and milieu it claims to represent. But that is typical of Hollywood productions.

The majority of filmmakers are either ignorant of history (American, European, World, you name it) or invested in perpetuating the ideology of their corporate masters, so it is inevitable that their cinematic recreations will be hollow and false. It is disappointing, all the same, because they have the resources to do better, if only they would. And, while I am a stickler for correct costume in period dress (something, by the way, that the Brits seem to do so well; it must have something to do with the Victoria and Albert Museum), historically accurate clothing is still only clothing. Hanging it on empty characters will not bring them to life. However, it may lead some viewers to think that since the clothes are true, then the history must be too.

Gangsters have always dressed well. Remember John Gotti, the Dapper Don? And the claim so often made in movie dialogue, if not in open court, that they are “simple businessmen,” has an eerie ring in light of the corporate crime being regularly exposed at present.

CZ

San Francisco

This movie is just another example of Hollywood’s usual tack of engaging Hanks in roles that glorify lovable—if not laughable—losers. When one looks at many, if not all, of the films Hanks has done, each of his characters has some tremendous flaw that would otherwise be characterized as a blundering buffoon in each case.

Whether it’s a socially “correct” portrayal of a terminally ill person in *Philadelphia*, or a militarily inept officer in *Saving Private Ryan*, or a personally conflicted individual in *Forrest Gump*, the film viewer/theatre patron is doing no more than pouring money into a *Money Pit* when spending their money on his films. This is not to say that Hanks is not effective in his roles; it is more to the point to say that his effectiveness on the screen is a screen for society’s acceptance of ineptitude in various aspects of life and history.

It is certainly a tragedy to be terminally ill or killed in action or conflicted, or to be faced with an all-around losing proposition. Yet, this does not alter the fact that in each of these cases, Hanks represents someone who has diminished skills in leading a successful life. Even in *Castaway*, his character is dangerously close to being completely unable to deal with life on a very basic level. His eventual relationship with a volleyball shows how the modern-day Robinson Crusoe approaches his relationships in general.

The danger of having these kinds of representations is acceptance of a lower standard to which people can aspire in their lives. It’s “okay” to be someone who lives on the darker side of life, creating mayhem for the Depression era folks while maintaining a decent living for one’s own family, in the case of *Perdition*. This goes back to the days when gangsterism was glorified, and brings us to the present day when the glory now goes to the corporate thieves and thugs inflicting their own kind of “Depression” on the working men and women of today. As long as the current versions are not THAT bad, we might be thankful. Thanks to Hanks and company for showing us how fortunate we are.

But it’s not “okay” to really be someone whose concept of success is still bilking the general population not only out of their money to, in reality, support the Hollywood lifestyle, but out of their willingness to have ideals that rise above the intellectually and socially

irresponsible actors and their characters in celluloid silliness. This is the real road to perdition, maintained by those who covet little statuettes in a Mr. Clean-like image.

AER

Thank you for your insightful review of the latest slop being fed to the public.

U

Outstanding for its combination of insightful review, attack on capitalism, and suggestive socialism. Well-rounded.

DS

While I would certainly not make a case for *Road to Perdition* being a masterpiece, I did find it coherent, moving and certainly beautiful. It seems to me that the social and historical license (prettifying) that goes on in the film could just as easily be interpreted a different way entirely: rather than paint the criminals only as obvious socio-paths, the makers of this film have set the drama in the lives of characters we can all identify with. This might lead an audience of non-gangsters actually to think about moral issues. How subtle, how interesting a moral drama can you make about killers who rape and beat little girls?

What is thought-provoking to me here is precisely the nuances of conflict that your reviewer seems to disdain for extraneous reasons: what to make of a character who can adopt an orphan, love him, play piano, kill, and value his son above his own principles and, indeed, his own love for another?

But all of this misses the point anyway. Movies are not really meant to be instruments of moral instruction. What movies are really good at is engendering emotion. This they do by all the aesthetic means this reviewer seems to find despicable. The perfect recreation of the physical surfaces of another time and place. The cinematography of Conrad Hall, a genius in anybody's book. The spare, slow, silent form of the whole piece. The fact that we do not cut inside the room in which the innocent dead family lies. For me, these and a million other aspects worked together in this case to provoke a reasonably strong emotional reaction.

C

On the *Ground Zero* exhibition in Detroit

Thank you so much for this. And please convey my support to the artists that you interviewed as well for their courage and integrity. I was puzzled and

disappointed by the seeming silence of the artistic community in the face of growing state propagandized culture, and am heartened to see there is at least someone out there who is providing an alternative view.

MW

Kneeland, California

Dear David,

This was a great article. It was encouraging in one way and discouraging in another. Encouraging, because the artists are cognizant of, and speaking out on, the growing fascism in the country; discouraging in the story of the teacher describing her students. It has taken many decades of determined work by the power elite to effectively anesthetize the minds of young people. Borcila's students are the result. I feel great pity for them, great fear for the country, and heartsickness about the world.

Borcila's comments about the millionaire artists were apt. Being a former actor myself, I am appalled at the insularity of people who used to be called actors but now are really just departments in the corporate infotainment industry. As I believe you pointed out when writing about the Academy Awards, the completely self-referential actors in love with themselves and all of their money have succeeded in luring the greater mass of the public into their world of superficiality. Not only has their disconnection from the real world helped to lull their audiences into an obsession with trivialities, it has destroyed any real talent and integrity they themselves may once have had. This has not been good for any of the arts and the results can be seen everywhere from the Tate Modern in London to any channel you choose on television or any film churned out of Hollywood today.

Thanks again.

CZ



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact