

An essentially unprincipled approach

Heaven, directed by Tom Tykwer; The Grey Zone, directed by Tim Blake Nelson; Late Marriage, directed by Dover Kosashvili

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Heaven is the latest film by German director Tom Tykwer (*Run Lola Run*, *The Princess and the Warrior*), based on a screenplay by the late Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Kieslowski (*The Decalogue*, *The Double Life of Veronique*) and his writing partner Krzysztof Piesiewicz.

The film concerns a British teacher, Philippa (Cate Blanchett), living in Turin, Italy, who takes matters into her own hands after police refuse to act on her numerous complaints against the city's leading drug lord, a prominent businessman. Having seen her husband fatally overdose and many of her students become disastrously addicted to drugs, Philippa determines to kill the drug trafficker by planting a bomb in his office. The plan goes awry and four innocent people die instead.

In police custody, Philippa, stricken with remorse, comes to the attention of a young policeman, Filippo (Giovanni Ribisi). He contrives to communicate with her and ultimately organizes her escape from custody. Once having successfully completed her mission to dispatch the drug lord, Philippa takes off with Filippo for Tuscany. Here they meet their final destiny.

Two general tendencies have encountered one another in the production of *Heaven*: ironic or perhaps shamefaced mysticism (Kieslowski) and empty-headed subjectivism (Tykwer). The result is unconvincing and unappealing.

Kieslowski (1941-96) began his film career making documentaries and feature films under the Stalinist regime in Poland. His most famous documentary was *Workers '71*, about the Szczecin strikes of 1971. He made his first feature for the cinema, *The Scar*, in 1976. He became known as one of the leading figures in the Polish cinema of "moral anxiety," a school that claimed to be taking an unflinching look at contemporary society. (An outlook presumably embodied in the title of one of Andrzej Wajda's works: *Without Anaesthetic* [1979].) A film Kieslowski made in the midst of the Solidarity strike movement, *Blind Chance*, was banned after the declaration of martial law and not released until 1987. In collaboration with Piesiewicz, he made *Decalogue* (1988), *The Double Life of Veronique* (1990) and *Three Colors* (1993-94).

Kieslowski was able, as were a number of Soviet and east European filmmakers, to summon up a degree of honesty and artistic integrity, and humanity, in the face of Stalinism's corruption and tyranny. The bureaucracy's collapse, however, revealed the severe limitations of his outlook. His last films (*Veronique*, the *Colors*) are cold, abstract and tedious. He announced his retirement from filmmaking at the Cannes film festival in 1994.

An unabashed Christian commentator is probably closer to the mark about the intellectual and moral essence of Kieslowski's work than his legion of secular admirers. James M. Wall, editor of *Christian Century*

magazine, comments that "Kieslowski's vision is not that of a fallen believer, but that of a man who was still related to God, not through an institutional church, but as part of a wider community of the spirit."

Wall observes that the Polish director was possessed of "the awareness that the human condition is fraught with chance encounters, accidents, gifts, and pain, which all appear to be random occurrences, but which, seen from a larger perspective, fall into a divinely understood pattern." The films acknowledge "a supreme wisdom [that] knows exactly what and why things happen to us as they do." Wall goes on, in a comment that bears directly on *Heaven*: "We are all connected to one another for a purpose, but God alone knows that purpose ... [T]o Kieslowski, this connectedness is more than fate or coincidence; it is an expression of a reality that transcends human existence."

Hence the remarkable and timely appearance of Filippo in Philippa's life, the miraculous nature of their escape, the character of their final ascent into the clouds in a helicopter. Hence too the otherworldly and vaguely supernatural feel to the film as a whole. (Blanchett and Ribisi are both attractive and appealing performers; none of the film's faults should be laid at their feet.)

Presumably Filippo's intense and unrelenting love has a celestial ingredient to it; his successful effort to get Philippa to open up emotionally to him demonstrates the power of God's grace. Their "connectedness" in the spiritual sense ("more than fate or coincidence"), their existence as "soulmates," is underscored by their first names (Italian and English, male and female forms of the same name), the manner in which each have his or her head shaved while hiding out from the authorities, their similar dress at the end, and so forth. Indeed, there is something of the Christlike in Ribisi's Filippo, as he guides Philippa through her spiritual journey (from harsh, dark, gridlike Turin to the warm, undulating, sunny Tuscan hills) and redeems her with his love. All this religiosity is unstated, but it is unquestionably present, in the form of the film's dreamlike cinematography and pacing.

What would be the point of noting that the narrative has obvious absurdities, that the protagonists function in an internally inconsistent fashion, that the goings on have a generally unconvincing character, when one is, after all, up against the working out of divine providence?

Nonetheless, the essentially unprincipled approach of the film's creators should at least be pointed out.

It is abundantly clear that the issues of vigilante-style terrorism and drug abuse are merely the pegs on which Kieslowski and Tykwer chose to hang their rather meager morality tale. When asked about the film's relationship to the events of September 11, Tykwer commented (to Jason Anderson in *Eye Weekly*), "To me, it was not really an issue because the film is not about terrorism at all." Well, then why did he make a film about the subject? Kieslowski-Tykwer create a work in which a bombing and the murder of innocent people take place, a form of individual

terrorism, and then the director asserts that this is not actually the subject at all.

Nor is the drug trade “really an issue” either, obviously. After all, a political assassination is one thing; a distracted or disoriented individual could persuade herself that the death of a hated political leader might have an impact on the course of events. But the killing of a drug lord? No one in her right mind, and the filmmakers paint Philippa as being very much in her right mind, would entertain the notion for an instant that such a death would affect the multi-billion dollar international traffic in drugs.

Is the aim of the killing rather to call attention to the drug addiction crisis? If so, Philippa does not make and seems not to have been prepared to make the slightest public effort in this direction. And the flimsiness of the entire conceit is revealed by the fact that once Philippa and Filippo make their getaway, neither drugs nor bombs nor her husband’s overdose is mentioned again. They simply gaze adoringly into one another’s eyes. Philippa’s unfortunate, drug-addicted pupils back in Turin are long forgotten. What a cavalier and cynical attitude on the filmmakers’ part!

For that matter, does Tykwer care about Kieslowski’s particular brand of rather dreary, existential Christianity? Probably not. His attraction for the script (offered him by the producers) may have as much to do with career considerations as ideology. In any event, such people calculate, what does it matter very much, as long as the film is well thought of in the right circles?

Tykwer explains: “The film is more about redemption. It offers a concept for it and offers a concept of love that I very much appreciate and try to advertise. ... It’s basically the concept that love can help us find our true perspectives and our true meanings. This is not about God being somewhere else, but in ourselves and what a gift that is.” Is it not possible to get beyond this level of banality, the belief-system of the average introspective middle class adolescent?

Like the films of a Lars von Trier or a Takeshi Kitano, although perhaps with quite distinct conclusions, Tykwer’s is a cinema of essentially contentless extremism: a great deal of commotion is organized to conceal the fact that the filmmaker has little to say about contemporary life in general or even his own individual life and circumstances.

Tykwer’s specific contribution to international cinema seems to be his commitment to subjectivism. He told interviewer Anthony Kaufman that subjectivity “is the most exciting part of filmmaking. Subjectivity, that’s all what it is. And the ability to transport subjectivity to such a high degree, and relate it to other people. I really want films to throw me into someone else’s subjectivity.”

The grasping of “someone else’s subjectivity” is of course vital for an artist, but such a comment leaves out the critical issue: is there an objective content to this subjectivity, or are we simply wandering in a maze of personal perception, where everyone’s opinion is as good as everyone else’s? (Again, this is something out of a high school philosophy class discussion: “If I say that wall is green, even though everyone else in the room says it’s red, well, it’s green to me.”)

The intellectual laziness, the refusal to think any truly difficult and perplexing problem through to the end, the reliance on formal gimmicks and atmospherics in place of serious characterization and analysis, all this makes a Tykwer vulnerable to revisiting the rather tired warhorse of Christian redemption as envisioned by Kieslowski and Piesiewicz.

After viewing *The Grey Zone* at the Toronto film festival in 2001 I wrote:

The Grey Zone, written and directed by Tim Blake Nelson (*Eye of God*, *O*), from his own play, is an extremely painful film to sit through. The work is based loosely on the book, *Auschwitz: A Doctor’s Eyewitness Account*, by Miklos Nyiszli, a Hungarian Jewish doctor who assisted the infamous Josef Mengele in his hideous experiments on concentration camp inmates. The film centers around the activities of a group of Hungarian Jews who make up Auschwitz’s twelfth *Sonderkommando*. The

members of these “Special Squads” were selected to prepare fellow prisoners for the gas chambers, to process the corpses after gassing, stripping them of clothes, valuables and even hair and teeth before incineration. Anyone who refused to perform the duty was shot on the spot, and many chose suicide over execution. The *Sonderkommandos* lived for an extra four months at most, with certain privileges (their own quarters, better food, alcohol, cigarettes, etc.), before being murdered themselves.

In Nelson’s film, which mixes historical and fictional figures, the special squad members are preparing to organize the only armed revolt that ever took place at Auschwitz, in October 1944. They are squabbling among themselves about the proposed date of the rebellion. Meanwhile a young girl who has somehow survived the gassing is discovered. The *Sonderkommandos* become obsessed with saving her, although it puts the revolt at risk. Women munitions workers who smuggle gunpowder to the insurgents are tortured and publicly executed. The revolt is abortive and brutally suppressed.

Nelson says: “*The Grey Zone* is the story of people trying desperately to give their lives meaning in a place designed to kill. Each character has a different definition of what a meaningful life is. And while there are people who act heroically at given points, this is not a film about heroes.” Further: “At the time I began researching their lives [the *Sonderkommandos*], I was an able-bodied Jewish man in my early thirties, so it could have been my life, my predicament. To this day I cannot tell what I might have done if faced with their impossible choice.” And: “The fact is that conditions in the camps, and particularly in the *Sonderkommandos*, brought out shameful qualities in men, the most benign of which were mistrust, greed, xenophobia and self-hatred.”

The film is a serious effort on the part of all concerned; the exposure of the horrors of the concentration camps and Nazi terror is entirely legitimate. However, films set in such circumstances have an almost built-in limited value, at least insofar as they concentrate on the issue of individual moral decisions. They tend to confirm what most people with any knowledge of history and its traumas already understand: that under certain monstrous conditions human beings will “choose” (i.e., see no alternative but) to do the most abominable things to one another. This proves that humans can be reduced to an animal state, and not much more.

Nelson’s concern with the “shameful qualities” of those placed in an inhuman and unbearable setting is not terribly helpful. Perhaps it would be more useful to concern oneself with not merely the “shameful qualities” of those who created the setting in the first place, but the social and political circumstances that gave rise to a state dedicated to such horror? At certain points the film’s incidents are so dreadful that it tends to deaden, not awaken, thinking. It seems, for all its sincerity, a substitute for a serious analysis of Nazism. It’s not clear how a work like this will help prevent the resurgence of fascism in our time.

After viewing *Late Marriage* at the Vancouver film festival in 2001 I wrote:

Late Marriage from Israel, written and directed by Dover Kosashvili, has a wonderful, funny opening scene. The Georgian-Jewish parents of a 32-year-old PhD candidate at Tel Aviv University, Zaza, set up a meeting with the family of a 17-year-old girl in hopes that a marriage might result. Zaza and the girl are left alone in her bedroom to get to know one another while the various relatives discuss the details of the potential match elsewhere. Ilana is a gimlet-eyed, no-nonsense girl. She sizes up the philosophy student pretty quickly and finds him wanting. “I want a rich man,” she tells him. That doesn’t stop her from making out with him on her bed while the two sets of parents trade pleasantries in the next room.

The film, unhappily, goes downhill from there. Zaza is in love with a passionate Moroccan divorcee, Judith, who has a six-year-old girl. He spends his nights there. His overbearing parents and assorted relations trail him and find out about Judith. They break in on the pair like a gang of

thugs and threaten the unfortunate woman with bodily harm if she doesn't leave their precious Zaza alone. He doesn't have enough gumption to tell his parents to go to hell. Seeing that he cares about his mother and father more than her, Judith later breaks off the relationship. Zaza is pushed into a marriage with a young woman he hardly knows. Future unhappiness seems guaranteed.

The problem is, the film falls into that category of a critique that really isn't a critique. It lacks savagery. Despite the unflattering portrayal of Zaza's parents and assorted relatives, the filmmaker still has a soft spot for them. It's not that they need be painted as villains personally. Not at all, that's precisely the point. They are operating with of the best of intentions, with all the love they can muster. This makes their actions all the more *objectively* monstrous and Zaza's cowardice all the more repugnant. One can't help but feel that this sort of half-hearted appraisal, done with a shrug of the shoulders and an "Everyone has his reasons," is a partial accommodation to a deeply conformist climate. Such disgusting, destructive behavior needs to be submitted to a far more biting assault.

Bloody Sunday, written and directed by Paul Greengrass, has opened in North America. We commented on the film earlier this year: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2002/feb2002/ire-f21.shtml>



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