

Filmmaking and American social life

Blue Car, written and directed by Karen Moncrieff

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There is a telling moment in Woody Allen's *Stardust Memories* (released, significantly, in late September 1980, five weeks before the election of Ronald Reagan as US president), in which Allen's character, a successful filmmaker, takes a girl-friend to see Vittorio De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* (1948), the Italian neo-realist work about a man driven by his poverty to steal a bicycle. Afterward Allen patiently explains to his companion that in "a more affluent society," such as America, the "social problem" can be set aside, freeing artists to deal with love, sex, aging, death and other such matters.

This philistine notion, advanced crudely in this instance by Allen, that the "social problem" should or *can* be separated from the "eternal" questions of life, Eros and death has dominated American and European filmmaking for the past two decades or more. It continues to do so in large measure, although there are now occasional hints of something different making itself felt. An increasingly affluent layer of filmmakers consciously repudiated its own and other people's "radical" indiscretions of the late 1960s and early 1970s and found over time more and more in common with the ruling elite. The filmmakers' general satisfaction with the existing state of things has discouraged them from investigating social life too closely. Instead they have found other, "higher" interests.

In reality, human problems, even the most eternal, are always stamped unmistakably by a specific social and historical setting. Humanity's biological make-up changes slowly, its social forms far more rapidly; these latter *qualitatively* affect the manner in which problems of life, love and mortality are worked through. "If there were no changes in psychology produced by changes in the social environment, there would be no movement in art; people would continue from generation to generation to be content with the poetry of the Bible, or of the old Greeks." (Trotsky) The artist who consciously seeks to locate his or her work outside of history or the social environment places it precisely ... nowhere. Nothing renders a work more outdated or inconsequential than a false striving after the "universal" and "timeless."

Citizens of the future will simply shake their heads in amazement and perhaps disgust at the miserable manner in which the American film industry in our day has stood up to the test of providing, as one of its elementary duties, a picture of contemporary life. This is no small matter, considering the role the US plays in world affairs. One factor in the ideological confusion that exists around the globe is the falsification, deliberate or

otherwise, of real existing conditions in America by film producers, directors and writers.

What is the dominant reality in America today? Let us introduce a few facts into the sacrosanct realm of Art. The US has an adult population of approximately 214,000,000 people. Thirty-five million are either out of work, underemployed or working full-time and living under the poverty line. Some 40 million workers—one-third of the US labor force—now find employment as part-time, temporary, day labor, on-call labor and other forms of contingent labor. Fewer than 40 percent of jobless US workers received jobless benefits last year.

More than forty million Americans are permanently without health insurance and 75 million, one-third of the population under 65, were uninsured at some point in 2001-02. According to a recent survey, fully one in three Americans say they either had to go without food, clothing or health care at some point in 2002. Three and a half million American children live in extreme poverty, i.e., in households where basic necessities of life are simply out of reach.

An article in the April 2003 issue of *Scientific American* suggested that the current methods of defining poverty in the US were outdated. It argued that accurate criteria would depict a much bleaker picture, with 40 to 45 percent of American households either now at poverty level or significantly at risk of being able to get along only with charitable or welfare assistance.

For broad layers of what used to be called "the middle class," the situation is ever more tense and difficult. The average US consumer's debt-versus-annual-income level has never been higher. The average household owes 104 percent of its annual after-tax income, if mortgages are included. In 1990 the debt-to-income ration was "only" 85 percent. Despite record-low interest rates, debt payments presently absorb 14 percent of American household income.

According to the chief economist at Standard & Poor's, "We're looking at the most highly leveraged population that we've ever seen." Job losses and pay cuts have prompted many working-class families to borrow even more. Almost one-quarter of Americans took on more debt in January 2003. In February almost half of Americans with credit card balances paid just the minimum due on their bills, thus adding more debt. Credit card delinquencies reached a record level in the fourth quarter of 2002. US consumer debt, excluding mortgages, now stands at \$1.7 trillion.

The economic facts of life, of course, are only one side of the

story. To those must be added the changes in social demographics: the increase in urban and suburban population, the loosening or disintegration of old affiliations (political, trade union, religious, social), the transformation of the workforce and family structure (only 17 percent of American households uphold “traditional” family values—a husband working while the wife remains at home with the children) and so forth.

How could these complex realities and the extraordinary tensions they inevitably introduce not affect every relationship—at work, in the family, in love? And yet how many film artists, commercial or “independent,” register these conditions and their implications, even in passing? This neglect reveals something inherently unrepresentative, distorted and undemocratic about American filmmaking, scandalously so. The lives of tens of millions of people—with all their dilemmas, social weight and *drama*—carry on almost entirely outside the scope of the most powerful and “popular” art form.

One can think of only a handful of films in recent years which, even to a relatively limited extent, have “savored” of contemporary America. None of the following are flawless works, some are not even fully realized: *Boys Don’t Cry*, *A Simple Plan*, *crazy/beautiful*, *Election*, *About Schmidt*, *All the Real Girls* and a few others. To this list one might add *Blue Car*, written and directed by Karen Moncrieff, with necessary reservations.

A bright high school girl, Meg (Agnes Bruckner), finds a respite from a troubled family life through writing poetry and entering a national poetry contest with the encouragement of her sympathetic but demanding English teacher, Mr. Auster (David Strathairn). Meg’s father has left the family, her mother Diane (Margaret Colin) is struggling to make ends meet and her younger sister shows signs of psychosis. The girl translates some of her sadness and trauma—particularly over her father’s departure—into adolescent verse. Her feelings for Auster, filial or otherwise, deepen. In the end, he despicably takes advantage of the situation.

The film has certain outstanding features. Apparently the makers of *Blue Car* were obliged for financial reasons to film in and around Dayton, Ohio. One can only be thankful. The setting provides a considerable portion of the work’s truth. The handful of shots of drab apartment buildings, streets and shops are worth a hundred depictions of “eternal spiritual conflicts” or all the moral sweatings of our common or garden variety self-absorbed “independent” filmmakers combined. And, as a matter of fact, they say more, at least potentially, about the present-day “inner life.”

Margaret Colin is excellent as the harried mother, making desperate and perhaps humiliating efforts to win promotion, unable to pay sufficient attention to her two daughters, alternately angry and tender. The scenes in the family’s cramped, dark apartment simply have the indelible ring of truth, they smell of life. The title of this portion of the film could be “Lowered Expectations.”

Unhappily, the focus of *Blue Car* does not remain on Colin’s situation for long. Representing and artistically pursuing to the end her condition and fate, which speak to the condition and fate of millions, does not satisfy the filmmakers. They too have “bigger things” in mind.

Bruckner and Strathairn are individually fine, and an

examination of their relationship is legitimate, and certain moments (including the sex scene) are remarkably accomplished. Nonetheless, there are things about the film that simply do not hold together.

Moncrieff tries to make her life somewhat easier in relation to the treatment of Auster’s desire for Meg by presenting the latter both as a “normal” male infatuation for an attractive and emotionally deprived girl *and* a predatory violation. However, a 50-year-old high school teacher does not pursue a terribly vulnerable teenage student simply as the outcome of a natural increase in affection, on the one hand, and the need for refuge from marriage to an angry alcoholic (our introduction to his wife is one of the weakest and most unconvincing scenes in the film, although this is not the fault of the usually compelling Frances Fisher), on the other. This is a mad, self-deluded and self-destructive act, it is a leap into the psychic abyss. In the final moments of the seduction, Strathairn communicates some of this, but it has not been prepared in any serious fashion.

There are too many lapses of this sort (behavior that is seriously out of character, numerous plot contrivances organized so that some further episode will be plausible) to make the work even close to entirely satisfying. This must be bound up with the filmmakers’ choice, in the final analysis, to take the line of least resistance. They shy away from the “social problem,” unconsciously perhaps in part, perhaps in part as an accommodation to prevailing concerns and pressures (including market pressures), in the direction of a partially realized study of pedophilia.

Still ... Colin, the small apartment, the little girl’s craziness, the uninviting suburbs—these things stay with you.

Ironically, this succumbing to the “line of least resistance” from the point of view of official morality and social thought—toward a work more suitable for the “Lifetime” channel or the afternoon talk show circuit—is at odds with the organic flow of the narrative, which seems to demand further attention paid to the characters who are progressively pushed to the margins—mother and suicidal sister—and the overall socio-economic/family drama. In fact, the film, from an artistic standpoint, is considerably weakened by Moncrieff’s choices. A tribute to the gravitational force exerted by social pressure!

Nonetheless, insofar as *Blue Car* contains or retains traces of another, more materialistic and cold-eyed approach, implicitly socially critical, and insofar as Moncrieff and her collaborators were unable to carry out their “succumbing” to the line of resistance seamlessly, this suggests ambivalences and doubts about current orthodoxy, in short, the possibility that they are being pulled as well in healthy directions.



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