

What is a “work of realism”?

Raising Victor Vargas, written and directed by Peter Sollett

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Raising Victor Vargas is a generally appealing film about Latino teenagers in Manhattan’s Lower East Side neighborhood, directed by the young American filmmaker Peter Sollett (born 1976). The work avoids a variety of clichés and attempts to take seriously its young protagonists’ lives and dilemmas. If it fails to go beyond a certain level of social perception, one can feel regretful, but hardly astonished.

Victor Vargas (Victor Rasuk) is a 17-year-old determined to earn a reputation as a ladies’ man. In the opening scene he is preparing to go to bed with a girl known in the neighborhood as “Fat Donna.” Fearful that public knowledge of this relationship may diminish his stature, Victor sets out to rectify the situation by becoming “the man” of one of the most sought-after girls in the neighborhood, “Juicy Judy” (Judy Marte). After initially being rebuffed, Victor seeks out the assistance of her younger brother Carlos who, in turn, wants an introduction to Victor’s younger sister Vicki.

Judy eventually accepts Victor’s offer, but she has her own ulterior motive: having a boyfriend will protect her from the aggressive behavior of other marauding adolescent males. Meanwhile her best friend, Melonie (Melonie Diaz), and Victor’s best friend, Harold (Kevin Rivera), are engaged in a courtship ritual—somewhat more private and direct—of their own.

The film follows the uneven course of these various attachments, as well as the effort by Victor’s grandmother (his parents are entirely out of the picture) to keep her three grandchildren on the straight and narrow. When the elderly lady (Altagracia Guzman), a Dominican immigrant, becomes convinced that her other grandson Nino is coming under the sexually corrupting influence of Victor, she drags the latter to family court.

Sollett is attempting something relatively subtle (and rare these days) in *Raising Victor Vargas*: to capture the harshness of an environment without painting its human relationships as unrelentingly harsh and irremediably destructive. It has been an assumption of most US filmmakers for a considerable period of time that life in the “inner city” is simply brutish and violent.

While not turning a blind eye to the bleakness of the surroundings—Victor’s family lives in a cramped tenement in a poverty-stricken neighborhood—the writer-director operates with a certain delicacy to draw out from his young performers quite naïve, elemental and, on the whole, genuine emotional responses. And, for the most part, despite the tough talk and bravado, the young people act rather tenderly toward one another. There is a certain degree of pleasure in viewing this.

Sollett’s effort in this regard is clearly conscious, deliberate and pointed: these are people whose lives and humanity count for something. At a moment in history when most US filmmaking is

dedicated to the proposition that no one matters except the well-heeled and that no activity means anything except one associated with the accumulation of wealth or power, this is not such a small thing.

As he has noted in a number of interviews, Sollett wrote his film for the neighborhood in which he grew up, Bensonhurst in Brooklyn, a predominantly Italian and Jewish area. Unable to find adolescents from that milieu who could give a natural performance, he and his collaborator, Eva Vives, organized an open casting call in the Lower East Side. “The majority of kids that showed up were Latino,” Sollett explained in an interview included in the film’s production notes. “When Victor, Judy and the others came in to audition we were truly amazed. They were fantastic and obviously belonged on film. So, I reset the film on the Lower East Side.”

Sollett wrote a script, which he used for the purposes of raising finances, but worked extensively with his nonprofessional performers in a “process of improvisation.” This process provided “a wealth of material and moments that the actors could draw upon during shooting. From these moments, I would make script revisions and, if an actor struggled during shooting, I could remind him of something he did during the rehearsal.”

In a conversation with Ray Pride [www.moviecitynews.com], Sollett spoke about the filmmakers who had influenced him the most, John Cassavetes, Federico Fellini and Ingmar Bergman: “What do I think they have in common? They are humanists. At their best they are mapping emotional terrain not charted anywhere else. They look deeply into their characters, whether they be deep or shallow, and expose them for the best and worst they have to offer. And they are honest!... They are for the people! Human beings—life in general—are something of value in their films. People are more than a single objective or an obstacle or an object of sexual desire in their films. I admire their respect for humanity, even when they acknowledge that sometimes we harm each other unnecessarily.”

In another interview, Sollett noted that the “likelihood of developing a story like this, in this type of environment, is slim. For a lot of reasons. Because the people who live in this neighborhood don’t look like the kind of people who draw mass numbers of audiences to theatres on opening weekend. There’s a common assumption—by some filmmakers—that people don’t wanna go to the movies and have to see ... poverty. A lot of people operate on this thing that people want to escape—the fact of the matter is that most people in their day-to-day life *do* see poverty or are living in it, or have had some sort of personal experience with it, and poverty doesn’t *feel good*.” [www.filmfreakcentral.net]

The filmmaker is also flouting prevailing convention by “daring” to depict people not of his own ethnic, social or cultural background. Of course, this is a potential objection almost too absurd and

intellectually retrograde to consider, but it will no doubt be raised. Fortunately, Shakespeare was not discouraged by such logic from depicting court life in medieval Denmark or Schiller from portraying a 16th century Catholic queen of Scotland.

It would be all to the good, frankly, if American filmmakers, commercial or independent, consistently began taking an interest in lives and difficulties other than their own. They might begin to take note of the fact that their self-absorbed and self-referential works over the past two decades in particular have made almost no impact. Some subjects simply prove not to be of enduring or general human interest. Sollett's attempt is a breath of fresh air. It is one more small indication that American cinema is coming into increasingly close contact with life.

Is this, however, a "work of realism," as Sollett has indicated he intended to create? Yes and no.

If we mean by "realist" not a particular artistic school, but an attentive attitude to reality, then certainly *Raising Victor Vargas* merits the term. That is to say, the film attempts to be truthful about people's lives, it does not deliberately distort or falsify, it has a sense of perspective and proportion to it. Sollett's film strives to correspond to the actual state of things. These are recognizable human beings in recognizable settings. Again, not such an insignificant matter.

The chief weakness of Sollett's work, and this is to be found in David Gordon Green's films as well (*George Washington*, *All the Real Girls*), to which this bears a slight atmospheric resemblance (they also share the same cinematographer), is the relatively static and even complacent approach it takes, despite the grimy and decaying surroundings, to social life.

One understands in part Sollett's stance. As an aspect of his rejection of the sensationalized, brutalizing treatment of life in poor neighborhoods, he wants to emphasize the human and humane spark. ("It's not about drugs and guns and poverty.") Fine. But one can pull the throttle back too far, in the direction of idealization or prettification. To paint prettier pictures than necessary, and the film tends at certain points in this direction, does no one any service. The harshness in individual human relationships, in the end, reflects the essence of relations in a society based on the exploitation of one social class by another. To minimize the harshness can also mean underestimating the consequences of this exploitation and also the urgent need for its redress.

It is a fine line to tread. Grasping in their true proportions the humanity (or potential humanity) and inhumanity of contemporary human relations is the achievement of only the most profound artists, artists with both a deep compassion *and* a firm understanding of social and historical law, artists who see and feel the need for social transformation.

The aforementioned "complacency" in Sollett's work also perhaps has roots in decent intentions. He wants to be "realistic" about the contemporary world, not indignant or hysterical. "This is how people live, they are used to it, I refused to be shocked," etc. From this, however, to "Things are not so bad, life goes on, don't beat your head against the wall, the world can't be changed anyway" is not an immense (or unheard of) leap.

There is no objective reason why a realistic attitude toward contemporary life should exclude protest and outrage (of which there is virtually none in *Raising Victor Vargas*). On the contrary. A genuinely realistic approach must include outrage, because not all that is "real" is "rational" or deserves to survive.

And here is the key. To portray people "realistically" also means

portraying their social relations, not simply their day-to-day concerns or even their deepest desires. Sollett suggests that if you pulled Victor (the actor or the character) aside, "I don't think he would say, 'I'm about being poor. I'm about my socioeconomic affiliations.'" He'd say, "Well I wanna be an actor, I'd really like to find a girl I'm happy with." Like everybody else, you know?"

First of all, no one would suggest that any human being is simply the sum of his socioeconomic affiliations. That would be a caricature. However, the director ignores the reality that the very ambitions he refers to would not be the goals of "everybody else." They are socially and historically specific. A peasant in India wouldn't hold them, nor would an individual born to immense wealth in New York City. Victor (the actor) is a working class youth, who sees possibilities through a film career.

Moreover, why should the film artist be restricted to the aspirations of his actor or his character? He ought to have a larger, more expansive, richer view of life. When it comes to society, filmmakers at present give themselves almost no leeway. They prove in general terribly conformist toward the existing social order. And largely ignorant. At a certain point, willfully ignorant. This is an inexcusable accommodation to the current reactionary political climate in the media and the upper echelons of society generally.

"Since real people live on earth and in society," the 19th century Russian critic Belinsky noted, "and not in the air, not in the clouds, where only phantoms live, the writers of our day are naturally portraying society as well as people. Society is also something real, and not imaginary, therefore its essence is made up not only of costumes and hairstyles, but also of customs, habits, concepts, relations, etc."

This latter notion is more or less a closed book to our contemporary filmmakers, unhappily. Hence the limited quality of even the most well-intentioned. "Society is also something real." A radical conception!

Since social and historical processes appear to be more or less a closed book to Sollett, he inevitably tends to fall back in the end on the prevailing orthodoxy that what counts is "individual responsibility." Thus we get the title, "Raising Victor Vargas." Of course individuals must and do mature (or fail to), but that is hardly the issue. This is the picture of an impoverished neighborhood, victimized by official neglect and indifference, endless cutbacks, low wages, wretched housing. What sort of world has the fictional Victor been "raised" or raised himself to live in? Is that not a critical question?

American filmmakers need to proceed from registering an interest and a concern with social questions ... to an analysis and rejection of the old social order. Only along this path will the genuinely and radically "realistic" work emerge.



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