Can Hollywood be subversive?

Dirty Pretty Things, directed by Stephen Frears

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When considering the trajectory of British director Stephen Frears, a larger question looms immediately: How possible is it to make subversive films within the ambit of the Hollywood studios?

Frears came to filmmaking out of the politically radical British theatre of the 1960s, via work for British television in the 1970s. In the 1980s, the director received critical acclaim for films such as *My Beautiful Launderette* (made in collaboration with writer Hanif Kureishi), in which cultures collide against a backdrop of pervasive urban decay. These films were honest, and even endearing, although not without some traces of the demoralization that characterizes the left radical milieu.

In the late 1980s, Frears made the move to Hollywood, and has since then produced a series of films, none of them ground-breaking (although *High Fidelity* is pleasant). The question of whether the director would conquer Hollywood, or whether Hollywood would instead conquer the director, seems to have been postponed.

In Frears's latest film, *Dirty Pretty Things*, this question is raised yet more acutely. The artistic starting point of the film is a genuine outrage over the conditions experienced by the most vulnerable and oppressed layers of society—cab drivers, prostitutes, hotel workers, illegal and "undocumented" immigrants.

This is a worthy subject. In the United States, it is estimated that there are as many as 10 million undocumented foreign workers. It is estimated that as many as 500,000 illegal immigrants enter the European Union (EU) each year. In many cases, these workers' attempts at a better life involve placing themselves in the hands of people smugglers, and for a significant number the gamble proves fatal. Those that arrive successfully face a struggle to maintain their precarious and vulnerable position in their new society.

Frears has a genuine sympathy for these most oppressed layers of the working class, and *Dirty Pretty Things* plays out a borderline fantastic sequence of events in the lives of a number of characters as they struggle to maintain their precarious existence as refugees and undocumented workers in London.

Okwe (Chiwetel Ejiofor) trained and worked as a doctor in Nigeria. Now he works two jobs, as a taxicab driver and as a hotel desk clerk. To stay awake, he continuously chews a narcotic leaf. Senay (Audrey Tautou) is a Turkish Muslim refugee who is not allowed to work or take rent, although she must do both in order to get by. She works as a cleaner at the same hotel as Okwe, and rents her couch to him. In the course of the film, it becomes apparent that she is deeply in love with Okwe, and for his part, protecting Senay becomes Okwe's vocation.

There are a number of moments in the film when the multicultural nature of the city is depicted. At one point, Okwe visits a Somali man who is sick because one of his kidneys has been crudely removed. The serious language barrier is overcome by the family's young girl; it is clear that she already moves fluidly through the various cultures she inhabits. Okwe's friend and chess partner is former Chinese surgeon Guo Yi (Benedict Wong), who now works as the overnight attendant at the morgue.

The characters joke with one another about their cultural differences. Okwe gently needles Senay about her dietary restrictions while cooking a meal for her. And after Senay is raped, she jokes with Juliette (Sophie Okonedo), a prostitute, substituting one "religiously inappropriate" epithet for another. There is a sense that the filmmaker knows the present situation

is emphatically not a clash of civilizations but rather a conflict of classes.

The "negative" characters in the film are somewhat overdrawn. This is especially true of Sneaky (Sergi López), the hotel manager who is the front man for the illicit trade in organs that forms the main element in the film's narrative. One is left wondering where exactly this character came from, and the film doesn't seem to offer any room for an explanation other than sheer "evil."

(Sneaky is not without memorable lines—at two points in the film, he makes darkly humorous quips about how his efforts as an organ racketeer lead to workers getting to stay "in this beautiful country," surrounded at that point by the dank tunnels of the hotel's basement.)

Hollywood has, of late, specialized in the production of films glorifying cops, generals, criminals and mass-murderers; in that context, Frears's attitude towards the forces of "law and order" is not unwelcome. The immigration enforcement officers who try to catch Senay breaking the conditions of her refugee status by working at the hotel are just thugs.

In exaggerating the negative characters, however, there is a risk that the film's critical energy is focused merely on the system's desk clerks, on its mere face—on its appearance, not its essence. The film risks becoming a critique that goes only so far and no further.

As the film builds to its climax—as it becomes apparent that things will either get better or worse, but that they will not stay as they are—Frears celebrates the moments when the oppressed characters begin to fight back. Thus Senay, forced to perform fellatio on the manager at the sweatshop where she takes up employment after the hotel, bites.

And after the final denouement (the details of which I will omit here so as not to spoil it for the reader), Okwe addresses an anonymous operative with righteous indignation: "We are the people that you do not see. We drive your cabs, clean your rooms, suck your cock." This line encapsulates the film's healthy sentiment.

Unfortunately, the dramatic climax of the film is a Hollywood ending in which our protagonists overcome their predicament by an outlandish and perilous counter-scheme to that of Sneaky.

This is very disappointing! Given the wider significance of the conditions we have been shown, given the outrage we share with the filmmaker over these circumstances, is it not too much of a stretch to suggest that they can escape their situation just like that? Was this really the ending that flowed aesthetically, truthfully from the conditions set up by the film in its first moments? Certainly not.

It is not a matter of pining after a more realistic ending, or for that matter after a cheap propagandistic ending. In truth, the solution to this problem is not a simple matter. *Dirty Pretty Things* welds subversive artistic intent and inspiration on to the forms of the Hollywood thriller. This is a perilous operation, to say the least.

Lest anyone forget, leading figures in Hollywood have signalled almost to a man their absolute acceptance of the agenda of the Bush administration. Could this oligarchic enterprise fund the production of truly subversive art? It would be stupid to dismiss the possibility out of hand, but it would be equally stupid to ignore the extent to which the industry's confluence of interests with the most reactionary forces corrupts the products of even its most noble-minded artists.

In the final analysis, *Dirty Pretty Things* is neither fish nor fowl. It is neither Hollywood potboiler, nor snobbish art film, nor—with all due respect—a masterpiece. This contradictory verdict is in no way a condemnation of Frears's work. On the contrary, one wants to see where this contradiction goes.