

A song, an era that still haunt us

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Gloomy Sunday [Ein Lied von Liebe und Tod], directed by Rolf Schübel, written by Schübel and Ruth Toma, based on the novel by Nick Barkow; In America, directed by Jim Sheridan, written by Sheridan, Naomi Sheridan and Kirsten Sheridan

The German film *Gloomy Sunday* (released in Germany in 1999) begins in contemporary Budapest, Hungary, with the 80th birthday party of a German businessman, Hans Wieck (played as an older man by director Rolf Schübel). The import-export king arrives with great fanfare at the Szabó Restaurant, an eatery in which a young Hans (Ben Becker) spent lonely hours in the 1930s devouring the house specialty—beef rolls—and pining away for the restaurant’s beautiful manager Ilona Varnai (Erika Marozsán), girlfriend of the restaurant’s owner. At the sight of Ilona’s photograph on the piano, the octogenarian drops dead. Decades ago, Wieck had photographed her as part of his experimentation with a relatively new technology.

The camera moves in on the beautiful face in the photograph and the time-frame switches to the 1930s. Szabó Restaurant owner László Szabó (Joachim Król), Ilona’s lover, hires a penniless pianist and composer, András Aradi (Stefano Dionisi), at Ilona’s urging. She is instantly intrigued by the intense young artist. László, Ilona and András embark on a sometimes rocky, but generally enlightened sexual threesome. András composes a song for Ilona so melancholically haunting it begins inciting people to commit suicide. As András’ melody wafts across the air-waves, the suicides become an international phenomenon. Unable to cope, András shoots himself. He dies largely unconscious that his creation has captured a popular mood associated, if only semi-unconsciously, with the rise of fascism as it goose-steps forward.

The film, and the novel by Nick Barkow, were inspired by the song, “Gloomy Sunday,” composed in 1933 [significantly, the year of Hitler’s taking of power] by Hungarians Rezső Seress and László Jávör. Shortly after its composition, authorities began to connect the song with a rash of suicide cases throughout Hungary. Suicides notes with references to the song and recordings of the tune on turntables were routinely found in the rooms of the those who had taken their lives. Composer Seress killed himself. Most famous was Billie Holiday’s 1941 rendition of “Gloomy Sunday,” but Artie Shaw and more recently Bjork and Elvis Costello were among the many artists who recorded the song.

When Ilona rejects the ambitious Hans, the latter throws himself into the Danube, only to be rescued by László. Hans reappears in the 1940s as the German officer in charge of the “Final Solution” in Hungary. The process begins by the expropriation of Jewish businesses.

Hans’ attraction to Ilona and personal debt to László, who is Jewish, are in the end subordinated to opportunist maneuvers: he saves only rich Jews whom he feels will benefit him after the war. Hans comments to a Nazi colleague—“Why destroy what can enrich you?” László does not fall into this category. Despite degrading attempts, Ilona does not succeed in preventing Hans from sending László to the concentration camps. A pregnant Ilona, divested of both her loves, returns to the restaurant.

The film reverts to the present, revealing the truth about Hans Wieck’s death. Ilona and her son have exacted their revenge.

With a gentle and careful hand, the film conveys something about the era. A fictional scenario effectively circulates around the peculiar real history of the song that gives the film its title. Although none of the horrors of the Holocaust are shown, the movie manages to transmit a strong sense of the experience. Its specter haunts the film from beginning to end.

The love triangle formed by Ilona, László and András, a kind of refuge from the increasingly ominous outside world, has an innate logic given the unfolding of a terrible reality.

Tension permeates the film’s elements—the faces of its characters, its mood and visual details. The giddy obedience of Hans’ Nazi secretary—prior to her being whisked away to an undisclosed fate—evokes the underlying insanity.

The scenes of Hans the Nazi, accompanied by other officers, trying to be nothing more than a casual patron of the restaurant are constructed with chilling psychic tautness. Hans’ transition from a trusted friend to full-blown monster is well done.

The whole project is marked by a strong commitment to shedding light on the Holocaust through exploring its impact on the personal lives of the film’s characters. The four main protagonists dig deep into emotional recesses amidst beautifully clear and affecting images. If there is a criticism to be made it is that a certain banality and lack of subtlety afflict portions of the dialogue. Too much is spelled out for the spectator in an unnecessary fashion. This at times creates an interruption of feeling and a subversion of the exquisite tensions.

In general, the film could have relied more heavily on its

intuition and less on its tendency to explain what is repeatedly reinforced psychically and visually. For example, the continuous discussion surrounding András' inability to pen more than two stanzas of the song was redundant. The historic impulses that flowed through András' creativity (or lack thereof) were visually apparent and embedded in the mood of the film.

Gloomy Sunday touches upon momentous events in European and Hungarian history. The year 1943 saw the Warsaw ghetto uprising in Poland and the defeat of German forces by the Red Army at Stalingrad. On March 19, 1944, in response to Hungary's attempt to get out from under World War II and withdraw its armed forces from the eastern front, Germany invaded the country, installing a pro-Nazi puppet government. Between May and July of that year, nearly half a million Hungarian Jews were deported to Auschwitz and gassed shortly upon arrival. Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi official in charge of the Final Solution, had plans to kill the rest of the Jewish population in one day, but in December, Soviet forces completely surrounded Budapest.

In an interview with *AufbauOnline*, actress Erika Marozsán commented about her experience in making *Gloomy Sunday*: “This is a period where humanism broke. The world just fell apart. Before World War II, we had the feeling that humans could not treat other humans like that. So the whole morality was destroyed by the war. This is why we can't stop thinking about this period and analyzing it.... I have the feeling that it could [again] happen at any time. *Gloomy Sunday* makes you aware that politics can change very fast.”

Schübel's film brings aspects of this history and reality vividly to life.

By comparison, Jim Sheridan's (*My Left Foot*, *In the Name of the Father*) *In America* is the work of a poseur, whose primary commitment seems to be to his career. As one critic noted, the film has “both the makings—family pain, redemption, cute kids—and the marketing strategies of a huge Christmas hit,” not to mention its eye on some Oscar nominations.

Loosely inspired by events in the filmmaker's life (his two young daughters have writing credits), *In America* tells the story of Johnny and Sarah (Paddy Considine and Samantha Morton), an Irish couple with two daughters Christy and Ariel (real-life sisters Sarah and Emma Bolger), who have lost a son to cancer. The overcoming of this tragedy is the engine of the movie.

The family illegally enters the US (some time in the 1980s) and ecstatically boogies its way—literally—into New York City to take up residence in a drug house in Manhattan so that Johnny can pursue an acting career. Due to extreme poverty, the family is beset by painful challenges. It appears, however, that nothing sours them on the “land of opportunity,” and they negotiate their travails fairly easily.

In America's well-announced pivotal moment arrives when the little girls befriend a mysteriously eccentric Haitian painter,

Mateo (Djimon Hounsou), who has AIDS and lives in their tenement building. Filmmaker Sheridan cross-cuts Mateo's desperate, but primal, art making with Sarah and Johnny's desperate, but primal, lovemaking. The other-worldly Mateo ejaculates on the canvass as Johnny presumably ejaculates into Sarah. We soon learn what we have already suspected: that it is possible to tap into the mystical, universalist connection between life and death.

Sarah's premature baby survives by a transfusion of good blood as the dying Mateo expels his bad blood. Through this divinely-sponsored exorcism, the infant survives to lead the family out of darkness into the light. (Mateo has also magically paid for Sarah's \$30,000 hospital bill, returning balance to the for-profit medical universe.) Faithless after the death of son/brother, the family is now emotionally turned around. The film's soundtrack features the Lovin' Spoonful song, “Do you believe in Magic?” Through all of this the girls are extremely cute, Paddy Considine is quite cute, Samantha Morton is prone to irritating sullenness, Djimon Hounsou is more a demi-god than a human being and America the Difficult but Beautiful is noxiously unassailable.

In America is largely manipulative and unbelievable. Whether Sheridan is genuinely committed to the film's thematic religious and mystical silliness or whether he is opportunistically adapting to the reactionary climate is almost immaterial. The real question is: why would a filmmaker who has a reputation for dealing with sensitive subject matter choose to invert reality and present Reagan's (or Bush's) socially-polarized America as the land of unlimited potential? Sheridan depicts drug-filled cesspools not to criticize or protest, but to claim that they form merely the bottom rung of an ever-ascending ladder of success. *In America* is a Trojan horse of quasi-sensitive themes and images, obliging the invaded spectator to hold tight to his or her mental bearings.



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