# Of people at sea

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*House of Sand and Fog*, directed by Vadim Perelman, screenplay by Perelman and Shawn Lawrence Otto, based on the novel by Andre Dubus III

In *House of Sand and Fog*, both the 1999 novel by Andre Dubus III (the son of the late American short-story writer) and the new film directed by Vadim Perelman, a troubled young American woman, aided by a policeman with problems of his own, and a former Iranian air force colonel collide over a house along the coast south of San Francisco.

The woman, Kathy Nicolo (Jennifer Connelly in Perelman's work), has lost her deceased father's house through a combination of her own neglect and a bureaucratic error committed by local government officials. The Iranian, Colonel Massoud Amir Behrani (Ben Kingsley), purchases the house for a song at a county auction and refuses to relinquish ownership when informed of the mistake. He plans to re-sell the house for three times the price and thereby repair his family's seriously damaged fortunes. The county deputy, Lester Burdon (Ron Eldard), an unhappily married man, believes Kathy has been done an injustice and intervenes earnestly and, in the end, misguidedly. The consequences are tragic.

Both the original novel and the film version of *House of Sand and Fog* (the latter captures the essential concerns of the book) shed light on certain features of American life, at least certain social types or personalities, although they hold themselves back from a penetrating or satisfying portrayal.

The novel is presumably set in the early 1990s, since Behrani refers in his narration (he and Kathy alternate as narrators in the first two-thirds of the book) to the recent Persian Gulf War. But there is something more distinctly "turn-of-the-century" about Kathy Nicolo's character and predicament in particular.

A need exists, one might say a vast and burning need exists, for artistic works that honestly and accurately reflect contemporary American life, including its most intimate and painful secrets. The virtual absence of such pictures of life at present is not a small matter. Art offers one of the principal means by which a people becomes aware of itself, its failings, its illusions, its collective dilemma, its hidden reserves of strength.

Through the creation of dramatic situations that both lay bare and artistically synthesize the essential problems facing a population and fictional characters who embody these contradictions in a living and indelible manner, the artist performs an indispensable task. Among other things, he or she forcefully and sensuously calls attention to difficulties that would otherwise remain obscured and in whose grasp great numbers of people would otherwise continue to writhe unconsciously and in tormented silence.

One might go so far as to assert that the entertainment industry's efforts to manipulate and numb those who consume its products, its relentless commitment to leaving reality unexplored, on the one hand, and the widespread commission of desperate, violent, anti-social acts (serial killings, school shootings, workplace violence), on the other, are entirely comprehensible at the very least as complementary phenomena. There is probably no significant society on earth that possesses less of an objective picture of itself—and is therefore more vulnerable to disoriented, delusional acts—than contemporary America. For this, its artists and so-called intellectuals share a considerable portion of the blame.

To know one's society is to be critical of it. To be shown and convinced that one's suffering is not unique but a generalized, "man-made" condition is to move that much closer to revolt. For the Russian population to have risen up in the early part of the twentieth century in three revolutions, for instance, would have been that much more difficult without the saturation of decisive layers of the population by the humanizing, sensitizing efforts of, among others, Gogol, Lermontov, Turgenev, Goncharov, Ostrovsky, Dostoyevsky, Leskov and Tolstoy.

There are problems that only come to light or, at any rate, only take on particularly sharp colors in art and literature. Of course, objective social and economic shocks and the intervention of socialist politics and political analysis play the decisive role, but an especially vivid sense of a society's ills, its psychic ills among them, and the human urgency of addressing them come from visual images and drama. A work of fiction, a painting, a photograph can suddenly illuminate a heretofore apparently insoluble problem: "Ah, that's what's been holding us back!" It can shed light, directly or indirectly, on the great stumbling blocks, as well as the sources of overcoming them.

It was not for nothing that Marx, during a period of political stagnation, remarked on the "present splendid brotherhood of fiction writers in England [Dickens, Thackeray, Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell and others] whose graphic and eloquent pages have issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together" ("The English Middle Class," 1854).

There is also the not unimportant matter of the need to communicate to people all over the globe the complexities of American life, thus contradicting the deliberate "pro-American" falsifications spread by the US film and music industries, media and government (see the delusional State of the Union address), as well as its "anti-American" counterpart abroad (which portrays a contented, prosperous population solidly backing official chauvinism and militarism). How other peoples see America and Americans is hardly a small matter either under present conditions!

One approaches a film like *House of Sand and Fog* with all this in mind.

When we first see Kathy Nicolo in the film, she's in bed alone lying to her mother about her husband and her life. In fact, her husband has left her some months before and her life is slowly unraveling. In her early thirties, she ekes out a living cleaning houses. Discouraged by her condition, she has been throwing away her mail for months. Communications from the county informing her of the impending auction of her house never reached her. Kathy only becomes aware of the fact that she's about to lose her house when officials show up and evict her.

The filmmakers wisely only hint at Kathy's past as a "substance abuser." A great deal of such abuse goes on in America, but it's more a symptom than a cause of unhappiness. The scenes of her drinking in the novel go on too long, seem external and fail to add much.

On this score at least, Perelman's film is more precise and knowing. His Kathy lives, like millions of Americans, in a state of low-level depression. (Connelly, whose somewhat sullen passivity can be irritating in roles calling for a more spirited bearing, is quite affecting here.) About the end

of her marriage, she says, “I wanted kids and he didn’t. I don’t know, I think if he really wanted me, he would have wanted them too, you know?” Indifferent, apathetic, she has no reason to think her life will improve. In the novel, she repeats a joke early on that had been told to her by an Irishman: America is the land of milk and honey, but “the milk’s gone sour and the honey’s stolen.” Her family is no help either, convinced as they all are that she’s a failure. When she calls her brother Frank, the owner of a car dealership, in real despair, he simply brushes her off.

Kathy’s eviction—for non-payment of a business tax that she never owed—shocks her, but doesn’t alter her approach to life. It’s simply another dirty blow that’s been dealt her. Thrown out of her bungalow, forced into a world of cheap motels, suburban diners and storage sheds, she responds in a fairly primitive manner to her difficulties, blaming “those Arabs” who have “stolen” her house.

In the novel, Kathy informs the reader: “I knew why I had gotten drunk last night, was smoking so much again, and why I was sleeping with Lester Burdon: losing my father’s house had been the final shove in a long drift to the edge, and I thought about calling Connie Walsh [her lawyer] again, just tell her to sue the county for as much as she could get. But that would take months, maybe years, and still my father’s only heirloom to Frank and me would be gone and even though it was just a little place in a low-rent beach town, I refused to be the one in the family who had let it slip away.”

By no means malevolent, however, she recognizes the members of the Iranian family as fellow human beings and eventually establishes friendly contact with Mrs. Behrani (Shohreh Aghdashloo), although it’s too late by that point. Burdon falls head over heels in love with Kathy’s toughness, her humorous, self-deprecating frankness. As she does in all things, she allows Burdon to take the initiative. He’s only too happy to oblige, determined as he is “not only to clean up everybody else’s act, but to make the world safe again by doing so, to make it right once and for all,” as the novel explains.

The essential outline of the Nicolo-Burdon affair—she, floundering and threatening to go down; he, determined to be a life-saver and making things ten times worse as a consequence—rings true.

The Iranian characters form the film’s weakest link, in my view, as they do in the novel. Fortunately, the filmgoer is spared Behrani’s stilted narration, presumably intended to suggest a Persian mind: “My wife has fifty years, but she spoke as would a young girl, a new bride. I thought perhaps she was disappointed in me, but then I regarded her smile, the fashion in which she held her chin low, looking up at me with those *gavehee* eyes, and as she took my hand and led me back down the corridor to her room, my heart was like a flat stone moving over water and my breath was held like the boy counting the skips of his good fortune.” This may work for some readers, I merely found it distracting and patronizing.

The decision to make Behrani a former officer in the Shah’s armed forces was not adequately thought through by Dubus. Such a figure simply carries too much baggage with him. One knows, and the novel spells it out, that this was a regime of torturers and murderers, backed by the US. The author is obliged to spend a good deal of his time overcoming the reader’s instinctive antipathy toward Behrani. And to what end? To prove that human beings are to be found in the most unlikely places, that “None of us are black and white,” as the author explains in an interview. This seems a disproportionately small dividend.

If Behrani had been made merely a “garden variety” Iranian or Arab bourgeois down on his luck, with the same determination to restore his family’s previous social standing and the same repugnance for Americans’ supposed slothfulness and irresponsibility, the story would have been significantly strengthened.

(Dubus’s unfortunate choice of the “spectacular” in this case is only one example of a tendency to take the line of least resistance. Kathy’s substance abuse, the shooting deaths at the end, the Iranians’ language and behavior, etc.—a good many crucial details flow along predictable channels. The author, who describes himself as having been a “Marxist” in college, sees certain things about American life, but is too often content to settle for relatively obvious insights. This is hardly the first contemporary American novel to locate itself in the marginalized world of cheap hotels, suburban diners and storage sheds. Dubus is a little over-pleased with himself for choosing that milieu. He includes too many arbitrary details that fail to add up to anything, as though registering the tacky debris of this stunted existence would by itself reveal its inner truth. Behind a general fair-mindedness—“everyone has his reasons”—may simply lie the lack of a sufficiently critical and angry attitude toward the present social and economic setup.)

The performance of Ben Kingsley as Behrani does not help, in my view. One always feels the presence of Kingsley’s unrelenting effort and preparation, the studied working out of each gesture, each facial expression and enunciation of each phrase. Barely a trace of spontaneity remains in the performance itself. One is meant to be impressed, overwhelmed by the effort. The actor’s work, no doubt well intentioned and sincere, invariably leaves me feeling tired and oppressed.

The film’s earliest scenes are its best, the most concrete and precise, including the first scene of Burdon and his wife in their suburban kitchen. Something of the deep alienation so prevalent in the US comes across, the reality of millions and millions of people utterly “at sea”—people cut loose from traditional family ties, official institutions, old allegiances, old moralities, lacking as of yet anything with which to replace them. People at sea cling all the more desperately to meaningless and useless objects; they even quarrel and kill one another over such objects.

The specific ending of the film, which wisely avoids the worst mistakes of the book and at least cuts things mercifully short after a series of catastrophes, is not successful or convincing; in fact, it’s rather clichéd and banal, but the intuition that violent, terrible acts flow inexorably in part from Americans’ unawareness and incomprehension of the simplest facts of their own lives is undeniably true.