

Small oases and the much larger desert

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Collateral, directed by Michael Mann, screenplay by Stuart Beattie; *Before Sunset*, directed by Richard Linklater; *Garden State*, written and directed by Zach Braff

Perhaps in the future it will be possible retrospectively to subject the contemporary American film industry and its leading figures to some kind of intense socio-psychological analysis and fully determine what made these people tick.

Of course, even now, one can grasp the essential outlines of the problem—too much wealth and too much time on their hands, social and artistic complacency, intellectual laziness, not enough thought and not enough to say, a capitulation to the generally retrograde cultural atmosphere of the past several decades and to the rightward shift in the US political and media establishment, etc.

Certain matters are clear, others are less clear. If someone produces nothing but rubbish, that's one thing; or, conversely, if an artist *always* seems to work conscientiously, at the highest possible level given his or her capabilities. It's a third case that is more perplexing. Determining precisely how and why an insightful work stands out in a given filmmaker's body of work as a fertile oasis in an otherwise barren and forbidding landscape remains at least a little bit of a mystery.

One can only conclude: if the gods are happy and the sun, moon and stars in proper alignment (i.e., if there's a sufficiently strong script and cast, if social forces lift a filmmaker above his or her limitations), intelligent works can emerge. The same Michael Mann, for example, who has now directed the slick and empty *Collateral* was responsible a few years ago for the moving and apparently deeply felt *The Insider*.

The new film tells the story of a Los Angeles cab driver, Max, who picks up an impeccably dressed man with money to burn. Vincent, the passenger, offers Max \$600 to drive him around all night. The offer is too tempting to refuse. However, Vincent turns out to be a professional hit man, embarked on a one-night killing spree to eliminate witnesses against a crime boss on the eve of the latter's trial. In the end, Max, teamed up improbably with the prosecutor in the case, disrupts and ultimately brings to a halt the murderous effort.

This is the sort of film to which critics cannot help but apply adjectives like "stylish," "mood-drenched," "lyrical," "expressionistic," "jazz-inflected" and such. There is considerable appealing imagery of Los Angeles at night. How grateful should we be? If a director is provided with talented technicians, the most advanced equipment and tens of millions of dollars, he or she probably faces more difficult challenges than presenting a sprawling urban center, with its varied architecture, boulevards and lights, in the form of pretty pictures. One of them might be saying something serious about the city and its life and inhabitants.

I will be blunter. Mann's much-praised "stylishness," in the long view of things, counts for next to nothing. It doesn't add, mean or say very much at all. It largely speaks to and about itself. It's a form of

showing off. It's tiresome, a diversion and a substitute. If Mann has something important to say about the world, let him say it, directly and clearly, and stop troubling us with "stylish" postcards.

The narrative in *Collateral* is preposterous. Let's leave aside the fact that in the course of one night in a metropolitan area of some 14 million people, two of Max's fares turn out to be intimately and even fatally linked. Let's leave aside his sudden ability with a gun when facing a master killer and marksman who has just dispatched an entire roomful of deadly enemies with perfect aim and considerable aplomb. Let's leave aside in general all the minor absurdities.

But what is one to make of a professional hit man, supposedly the best in the business, indeed so meticulous about his work that he has his night's assassination schedule carefully plotted on a laptop computer, *randomly* hiring a cab driver, about whom he knows nothing (even, for example, whether or not the driver is a moonlighting policeman) to carry him around from murder to murder?

Moreover, once his first victim has fallen through a window, landed on the taxi and seriously damaged it (leaving significant and visible bloodstains), making the vehicle instantly noticeable to the police, this same supposedly punctilious assassin insists on carrying through with his night's work! The spectator, far from concluding that he or she is watching the top man in his field, is entitled to ask: How has this maniac and bumbler ever completed a single assignment?

(And why do all the witnesses have to be dispatched in the course of one night? Yes, the trial is opening the next day. So what! Trials take weeks and months. Were all the prospective victims going to spill the beans in the course of one morning and afternoon? As with so many films today, much of what goes on in *Collateral* is simply done for effect, to impress with numbers, size, noise, body counts and so forth, without any apparent serious thought.)

The contrived driver-passenger arrangement is necessary so that Max and Vincent can square off against one another. Vincent is a misanthrope. He sees the universe as senseless and cold. Cruelty is all around us, in Rwanda, Los Angeles and everywhere in between. We're all alone. Max, on the other hand, is a normal human being with normal responses to death and violence. The murder victims are "someone's friends," he points out. Max tells Vincent, "You lack standard parts that are supposed to be there in most people."

We learn that Vincent is suffering from the only condition that is permissible at present in US films and television to explain a social ill: an abusive childhood.

Monstrous as he may be, however, within the framework of the film Vincent provides a necessary "wake-up call." When Max tells him that driving a cab is just a temporary job, although he's been at it for 12 years, and that his real ambition is to own his own limousine service, Vincent scoffs at him. "Life is what happens while you're making other plans." He suggests that Max had better seize the opportunity or life will pass him by.

The spectator, along with Max, is apparently intended to take Vincent's advice seriously. But why should we? Vincent is obviously a psychopath, whose own life is built around ending people's lives for money. Why should we listen to his advice about anything?

There's a marked difference between Alan Ladd's Philip Raven in *This Gun for Hire*, a repressed, obviously psychologically twisted killer, who gets caught up in political intrigue and for whom one feels a certain sympathy (and who doesn't offer anyone counsel on how to lead his or her life), and the Vincent of Mann's film. One is not meant to feel that Vincent is a victim of social circumstances, a reluctant or tormented murderer, but rather pleased with his looks, his wardrobe and, generally, everything about himself.

In any event, his advice is as banal as the sort that might be supplied by the average self-help guru: "Envision living every day with passion," "Have the courage to dream," "Live life to the fullest," etc.

The film is made largely without urgency, without concreteness, without any apparent awareness of the *particular lives* people are leading in America today. The rather timeless representation of the American Dream, Max's desire to own his own business, ignores the reality that for vast numbers of Americans, desperately treading water is the order of the day. *Collateral* implies broadly that were Max to become the little businessman that he has his heart set on becoming, happiness would follow—and leaves it at that. Of what use is this to anyone?

The notion occurs that Mann may have bigger issues in mind. The title is suggestive. "Collateral damage"—civilian casualties and destruction that result from a military action—is a favorite expression of the Bush administration and US military. Is the film in fact an allegory? Does Vincent the assassin represent a psychopathic ruling elite taking the average American, Max, for a ride? Is this an appeal for the American public to turn on its tormentor and deal with it? Probably not. Nothing else about the film is suggestive, and complacency, despite all the violent goings-on, prevails.

Mann has shown himself capable of making interesting films and generally chooses not to. Let's leave it at that.

Before Sunset is another disappointing film from Richard Linklater, the maker of *Slackers*, *Dazed and Confused* and *The Newton Boys*. It forms a kind of sequel to *Before Sunrise* (1995), in which a young American, Jesse, and a French student, Celine, meet on a train and spend some hours together in Vienna. They arrange another rendezvous in six months' time.

The new film, set in real time, takes place nine years later. The two encounter one another again, in Paris this time. Jesse, a writer, is there for a book signing and Celine, having seen a notice about the event, seeks him out. Jesse's novel, in fact, is based on their one night together. He is now married, with a child. Celine is a Greenpeace-type activist. He has a little time before his flight back to the US and they walk, sit and talk.

The film is pleasant enough, but the subjects of their conversation never make a deep impression. After dispensing with the inevitable small talk, they work their way around to the question of their first encounter and their failure to meet six months later as planned. He had shown up, she hadn't. How would their lives have been different? Were they intended to be together? We discover that he is not terribly happy in his marriage, and that she has a photographer lover who is often away. It seems they have a second chance to establish a connection. Perhaps he'll miss his flight.

The fact of change is at the center of the film. And it is unusual and interesting to see the same two actors (Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy)

in 1995 (in flashback) and 2004.

But the discussion itself is not compelling. One doesn't want to be impolite, but neither of these two nice people (the performers worked on their dialogue) is breathtakingly insightful. What they have to say is a bit inane and predictable, even about love.

One of the difficulties is that the film makes no distinction between the inevitable, natural processes of aging and change and the ways in which people are worn down by *man-made* circumstances. Youthful naiveté will and must pass, but a disappointing marriage or an unsatisfying career is not the inevitable result. These may have something to do with how life is organized at present, with institutions, with economic pressures, with things that are not inevitable and natural. *Before Sunset* avoids these and similar questions; its 80 minutes of dialogue fades from memory. Something larger hovers around the film, but is never seriously explored.

Linklater is a humane and lively director. He has a sympathy for people and their difficulties. But he needs bigger and bolder ideas. He needs to not be satisfied with the thin gruel left over from the radical and protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

Garden State is written, directed by and stars Zach Braff, who has a leading role in a television comedy series. A young man, Andrew Largeman (Braff), now acting on television in Los Angeles, returns home to New Jersey for his mother's funeral. He hasn't been home for years. He is highly medicated as the result of a childhood trauma.

There isn't much to be said about this film. In its depiction of a rather run-down and seamy side of New Jersey, it threatens to be taken seriously. The sad state of some of Andrew's old friends and their families arouses hopes. Enter the "love interest," in the form of Natalie Portman—apparently directed to be quirky and endearing—and those hopes evaporate. Everything between the two leading characters is completely hopeless.

It would be better, all things considered, if Braff didn't make another film until he finds something to say.



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