

Four films

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Alexander, directed by Oliver Stone, written by Stone, Christopher Kyle and Laeta Kalogridis; *Closer*, directed by Mike Nichols, written by Patrick Marber based on his play; *Ocean's Twelve*, directed by Steven Soderbergh, written by George Nolfi; *Ray*, directed by Taylor Hackford, written by Hackford and James L. White

A certain type of second-rate intellectual has always sought justification for his or her own swinishness by asserting the universal swinishness of humanity. Mike Nichols' *Closer*, from the play by Patrick Marber, seeks to demonstrate that men and women are generally contemptible: sadistic, weak, masochistic or deceitful.

The film follows the relations between four people, two English men and two American women, in London. Anna (Julia Roberts) is a photographer, Alice (Natalie Portman) a young stripper; Dan (Jude Law) an obituary writer and Larry (Clive Owen) a dermatologist. Couples come together, break apart, re-form. Mostly the four hurt each other, in certain cases, quite deliberately.

Larry in particular is something of a bully and a sadist. When cheated upon by Anna and Dan, he insists on her graphically detailing the sexual encounter. Marber and Nichols obviously consider themselves quite daring. When R.W. Fassbinder introduced a similarly painful exchange in *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972) he did it for the purpose of exposing relations based on money, possessiveness and narcissism. Here the sequence is simply distasteful, a luxuriating on the filmmakers' part in the humiliation of their characters and performers.

Larry is also given the opportunity to humiliate Alice, whom he discovers stripping in a club and with whom he later has sex. The playwright and the filmmaker would like to convince us that all this physical "stripping" provides a glimpse into the bared human soul. It doesn't. It simply shows us contrived pairings organized specially to reveal human cruelty.

The events and characters in the film are quite implausible, including the online pornographic chat that brings Anna (through Dan's practical joke) and Larry together. Filmmakers today do not bother to ensure that their dramas convince or cohere. That Larry is nothing like a dermatologist, Alice nothing like a stripper and Dan nothing like a mild-mannered obituary writer goes entirely unnoticed in commentaries. Everything important in the film is done for effect.

In any event, we know, without Marber and Nichols having to tell us, that people do terrible things to each other, and not only in love. The serious artist, the serious human being seeks the larger truth behind brutal behavior in social circumstances, institutions, the general conditions of life. Not to condone or gloss over, but to understand, and, ultimately, to effect a change. The coldness and self-indulgence on display in *Closer* no doubt exist, even flourish today, but the filmmakers are incapable of going beyond surface obviousness.

The individual facts of human behavior, all the betrayals, cowardice,

lies, acts of infidelity, can always be strung together to show that human beings are monstrous or pathetic. But one hasn't proven anything at the end of such an exercise. From the methodological point of view the "facts" have been used (or misused) to substantiate a preconception. The filmmakers have merely reasserted what they needed to (and cannot) prove.

Mike Nichols has a long career as a comic, actor and filmmaker. More than thirty years ago, when Nichols' filmmaking reputation was still bright (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *The Graduate*), critic Andrew Sarris suggested that the director "was more a tactician than a strategist and that he won every battle and lost every war because he was incapable of the divine folly of a personal statement. ... His is the cinema and theatre of complicity."

This last comment has a particular resonance today. Married to former Nixon staff member and ABC News journalist Diane Sawyer (she of the nauseating "chin-on-hand sincerity"), Nichols belongs to the New York cultural elite that has enriched itself and shifted far to the right. This doesn't prevent him from criticizing current studio filmmaking and its constraints: "It's like capitalism itself. It's out of everybody's control."

How can the filmmaker square such 'left' comments with his lifestyle and artistic opportunism? One would imagine that a deep cynicism must help. 'People are filthy, they're not worth lifting a finger for.' *Closer* conveys this sentiment more powerfully than anything else. Since humanity is hopeless, according to this logic, one is free to do or say anything, with a clear conscience.

Oliver Stone has obviously gone to considerable lengths to bring *Alexander*, his latest film, to the screen. It is an expensive film, shot in various locations, with a large cast. Despite the physical effort that has gone into it, the film seems half-hearted and largely without purpose.

Stone's work treats the best-known episodes in the life of Alexander of Macedon (356-323 BC). His education at the hands of Aristotle, his early military exploits as an adolescent, his succession as king of Macedonia after the assassination of his father, Philip of Macedon, his defeat of the Persians, his travels to and conquest of much of the known and unknown world (Egypt, Babylonia, Persia, Media, Bactria, the Punjab and the valley of the Indus) before his death at the age of 32.

In Stone's version, Alexander the Great (Colin Farrell) seems driven by the desire to compete with and surpass the feats of his father (played by Val Kilmer) and escape his dreadful, all-consuming mother, Olympias (Angelina Jolie). Furthermore, he apparently conquers Asia largely to overcome his fear of death. The desire to "Hellenize" (spread the influence of Greek civilization) the Eastern world or make economic and political gains seem like afterthoughts.

Stone has been concerned with some of these themes throughout his filmmaking career, and before, one imagines. The future director enlisted in the US army and served in Vietnam to atone, he asserts, for

a life of privilege and to confront certain personal demons. *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July* emerged from that experience.

Stone has always been vulgar. He works, to put it politely, in broad strokes. When those strokes have corresponded to something larger outside himself (“vulgar radicalism”), he has been partially effective—in those two Vietnam War films, in *Salvador*, in *JFK*, perhaps in part in *Wall Street*. *Natural Born Killers* and *Any Given Sunday*, on the other hand, are vulgar, nasty and dreadful.

At present the filmmaker is something of a throwback, in that he has obsessions and favored themes. Most American directors today merely have a career track. Stone’s obsessions seem almost quaint, almost heroic. Almost. We know he has Father issues, Fear of Death issues, Male Bonding and Soldiering issues, and certainly Mother issues, but these are not so fascinating as they need to be.

Alexander tells us little about its central figure or the sort of society he emerged from or envisioned. Its goings-on are rather silly. It’s not at all clear what Stone is getting at, other than suggesting that conquering the world is exhausting and psychologically damaging work. He wants us to admire youth and heroism, but a sensibility that finds it difficult to distinguish between the exploits of Jim Morrison of The Doors and Alexander of Macedon may be lacking some fundamental ingredient.

Ocean’s Twelve, directed by Steven Soderbergh, is a sequel to *Ocean’s Eleven* (2001), a film about the heist of three Las Vegas casinos. In the new film, the same crew is back, more or less, with a new objective: saving their skins by paying off the homicidal casino owner with an even more lucrative robbery, this time in Europe.

Ocean’s Eleven was flat and pointless, and made in bad faith by former “independent” maverick Soderbergh, but it made sense as a heist film. The new film is incomprehensible, irritating and, above all, smug. It is also crammed with ‘business,’ with plot twists and turns that have no significance other than to show off their creators’ cleverness. The film is so crammed with twists and turns, in fact, that it cannot spend the time to seriously develop a single one of them.

For example, what could have been an amusing episode in which the character, Tess, played by Julia Roberts gets to impersonate the ‘real’ Julia Roberts is so rushed and poorly scripted that any possible amusement is entirely drained away. The scene is simply botched.

Self-satisfaction and smirking predominate over all else. This has its roots in real life, the evolution of Steven Soderbergh from independent *auteur* to Julia Roberts’ favorite film director. Soderbergh seems convinced that he and his circle are the cleverest people in the film industry. He hasn’t noticed yet that the joke is on him, that he hasn’t made a valuable film in a decade, that a pact with the Devil is always made on the latter’s terms.

Indeed self-satisfaction is such a defining element of *Ocean’s Twelve* that the narrative has even been built around the characters’ pleasure in their own cleverness. The filmmakers deliberately mislead the spectator into thinking that the heist has failed, when, in fact, it has brilliantly succeeded. ‘He who smirks last, smirks best’ might be the film’s motto.

The final scene is a more fitting climax to this complacent effort than the filmmakers could possibly have intended. It pits Vincent Cassel as a French super-thief against George Clooney and Roberts as his American competitors. Cassel—the son of actor Jean-Pierre Cassel—and Mathieu Kassovitz (as director and actor) have blazed their own trails (*La Haine*, *The Crimson Rivers*, *Birthday Girl*) in smugness and narcissism in recent years. French self-satisfaction meets its American counterpart in this last sequence and bows before

it. After all, Soderbergh is in charge, Clooney and Roberts are bigger stars and US studios have ‘the big battalions.’ All in all, this is a grotesque and degraded effort.

Ray is a sincere, but formulaic and conformist, attempt to chronicle the life of singer Ray Charles (1930-2004). In fact, Charles himself was involved in its planning and pre-production until his death last June. There is no particular reason to believe that the singer understood his life and times in any depth.

Charles went blind at the age of seven, two years after watching his brother drown outside his Albany, Georgia home. The film takes these two events as the driving forces of his life—not poverty, not racism, not the force of music itself. Charles’ decades-long drug addiction is treated as the direct result of his individual traumas.

Ray, directed by Taylor Hackford, is very much marked by the impact of official contemporary ideology. Aretha, Charles’ mother, repeatedly tells her blind son not to be a cripple. Of course, human beings are capable of astonishing things, even when burdened with handicaps. The fact that Charles did not succumb to self-pity as a blind, black youth in postwar America is to his credit. But he had a remarkable gift that allowed him to avoid the worst possible consequences of his condition.

Others surely were not so fortunate. To preach the virtues of ‘individual responsibility’ from the point of view of the exception, the fortunate one, seems inappropriate. We are encouraged in that manner to feel compassion only for the successful.

Jamie Foxx impersonates Ray Charles effectively, but the film hardly amounts to more than that, a series of impersonations. The three performers who play the most important women in his life—Kerry Washington as Della Bea Robinson, his wife, Aunjanue Ellis as Ann Fisher, a blues singer, and Regina King as Margie Hendricks, one of his backup singers—are all fine and put their heart into the effort, but *Ray* hardly ever rises above the predictable.

The complexity of the postwar era in America as it found expression in the evolution of popular music might have made its way into the treatment of Ray Charles’ life. We receive only small glimpses of that complexity. The ability of Charles to fuse the different elements of his musical heritage—including country music, rhythm and blues and gospel—is depicted in musical performances. Overall, however, the filmmakers have taken the line of least resistance, fashioning a familiar, ‘inspirational’ American tale about a man who overcomes personal trauma and experiences individual success. There’s little richness in that.



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