

A culture at the end of its rope, continued

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Sin City, directed by Frank Miller, Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino, based on the graphic novels by Miller

One feels only contempt for this kind of work. *Sin City*, based on the graphic novels (comic books) of Frank Miller, directed by Robert Rodriguez and Miller, with the assistance in one scene of Quentin Tarantino, is a witless entrant in the “porno-sadism” category. Live actors perform against computer-generated backgrounds, recreating the look of Miller’s comic books, three of which, “The Hard Goodbye,” “The Big Fat Kill” and “That Yellow Bastard,” are given treatment in *Sin City*.

The work is effectively brought to the screen, but why would anyone want to? In “The Hard Goodbye,” for example, the hero, Marv (played in the film by Mickey Rourke), wakes up after a night with a beautiful woman (a high-priced call-girl, it turns out) to find her dead beside him. He sets out to find her killer. Marv thinks to himself: “When I find out who did it, it won’t be quick or quiet like it was with you. No, it’ll be loud and nasty, my kind of kill. I’ll stare the bastard in the face and laugh as he screams to God and I’ll laugh harder when he whimpers like a baby.”

Marv beats, tortures and murders his way toward the truth, shooting one man in the stomach and crotch, pushing another man’s face in the toilet, dragging a third’s face along the highway from his car. He receives almost as good as he gets, beatings, bullet-wounds and endless gashes (his face is constantly and fetishistically decorated with bandaids). The killer, tracked down to a farm outside town, is a cannibal who cooks women “like they were steaks” and mounts their heads on his wall like trophies. Escaping from this psychotic’s clutches, Marv plots revenge. Setting out on his mission, he checks the list: “Rubber tubing ... Gas ... Saw ... Gloves ... Cuffs ... Razor Wire ... Hatchet ... Gladys [his revolver] ... And my mitts.” Marv overcomes his prey and after sawing off his victim’s arms and legs, binds him to a tree and watches as a savage dog devours him.

This is enough perhaps to provide the flavor of the piece. The worst violence is more talked about than shown, but this small mercy hardly tips the balance in Miller’s favor.

Why would anyone be attracted to such material? Anti-intellectualism predominates in the Rodriguez-Miller-

Tarantino milieu, but insofar as the filmmakers construct an argument for their work, it has a schizophrenic character. On the one hand, the bloody goings-on are simply “playful,” “over the top,” “unreal” and “not to be taken seriously.” On the other, however, when pressed, the reasoning goes something like this: “As opposed to the ‘politically correct’ crowd [Miller nastily calls them the ‘grievance groups’], we are in touch with the darker side of life, if only in fantasy. This is liberating stuff. We don’t censor ourselves. This is human nature, brutish and cruel.”

(Of course, ironically, the filmmakers *do* censor themselves and submit to their own peculiar form of “political correctness.” Wanting to have their cake and eat it too, they conjure up helpless damsels in distress for their thuggish heroes to rescue, at the same time—with a nod to contemporary feminism—as they create “empowered” women: for example, deadly, unstoppable assassins in fishnet stockings and thong underwear. Indignation, while legitimate, simply will not do. Once again, scornful laughter at certain of these stupidities is equally or even more appropriate.)

All in all, *Sin City* is a repugnant mix of adolescent (early-adolescent, at that) male fantasy, artistic unseriousness and misanthropy. This is less than an artistic zero. The bloodletting is needed to divert attention from the dull, puerile and repetitive dialogue and action. The male heroes, like peas in a pod, resemble one another in their phony world-weariness, the women in their costume and availability.

There is no drama here, just a succession of thuds and screams.

Nor is this erotic or sensual material. Sexuality, as such, plays a small role in “The Hard Goodbye.” In fact, taking Miller’s story at face value (admittedly, a dubious undertaking), its extreme aggression and violence—including, ultimately, the protagonist’s brutal death in the electric chair—might be considered either Marv’s just punishment (meted out against the world and against himself) for experiencing a night of bliss, or his response—as a primitive human personality—to the shame he feels at the desire aroused by the woman during that same night. In either case,

disgust about sex and one's sexual feelings plays a principal role.

That puritanism and porno-sadism are deeply linked in America could hardly be better illustrated than by the timing of *Sin City*'s release on April 1. Its appearance one day after the death of the unfortunate Terri Schiavo—the preservation of whose vegetative condition had set off the reactionary attack dogs of the Christian Right and the Republican Party—and one day before the demise of Pope John Paul II—whose passing occasioned an outburst of religiosity such as this country has perhaps never before witnessed—was of course coincidental. But its appearance in the midst of these attempts to eliminate the separation of church and state and turn America into a quasi-theocracy is far from accidental.

At first glance, it may seem unlikely, but the makers of *Sin City* and theocrats in Washington and elsewhere share certain core beliefs: in the advanced moral decay and anarchy of modern society, the worthlessness of the existing democratic political forms to stem this decay and anarchy and, underlying everything, the essential rottenness of human nature (after all, this is *Sin City*). Of course, the former apparently wallow happily in these facts of life while the latter deplore them.

Inevitably, most Christian commentators have denounced *Sin City* as debased, amoral and so forth. However, a somewhat more farsighted appraisal appears on HollywoodJesus.com ("Pop culture from a spiritual point of view") by a Matthew Hill. He writes: "So, are *Sin City*'s violent leading men like God? And are we like the leading ladies, needing help in the midst of *Sin City*? I believe that's one way to see it. I believe that this film, at its core, underneath the violent veneer, is yet another story about people's undying sense that things are not right with the world. That there is, in Shakespeare's words, 'something rotten in the state of Denmark.' That we all, in fact, live in *Sin City*. And, going further, it's also yet another story about our undying sense that we need to be saved from such a place, because we won't be able to do it alone. That we all need a knight in shining armor. That we all need God. As such, *Sin City* is a great movie to rip apart, bare hands bloodied, and look at from the inside-out—a metaphor that I hope would make Rodriguez and Miller proud."

God is the spiritual name for this "knight on shining armor," but there are other, more earthly names for the figure who will make the trains run on time. There is truly a whiff of authoritarianism and fascism about such films.

What else is one to make of a work that includes repeated and loving descriptions of torture? *Sin City* was not filmed 40 years ago, or even a decade ago, but last year, under definite conditions, the exposure of systematic abuse and torture of Iraqis by the US military. Indeed, for the first time

in American history, abuse and torture of prisoners of war has become state policy. Nothing that took place at Abu Ghraib would be out of place in Miller's work. If films like Tarantino's *Kill Bill, Vol. 2* and *Sin City* are not cartoonish endorsements, they certainly represent a participation, consciously or not, in the campaign to accustom the American public to bloody revenge and torture as legitimate means of treating one's "enemies."

In a comment on *Kill Bill, Vol. 2*, we noted: "We will be told by some that Tarantino is merely reflecting the violence in the society around him, or even that he is holding it up to criticism. Nonsense. *Kill Bill* is not a critique of sadistic bullying, it revels in it. A calculated, manipulative (and orgasmic) heaping up of violent acts cannot possibly constitute a rejection or a critique. Tarantino's work lacks entirely that 'pathos of distance' characteristic of a reflective critique. The film itself is oppressive and bullying, as well unpleasantly pleased with itself.

"Sadism in film is not the same as sadism in life outside the cinema. But there is a connection between the two phenomena. A representation, a reflection bears some relationship to the thing represented or reflected. To be 'entertained' even by imitations of torture, or to seek to entertain by such imitations, suggests a disturbing degree of indifference to the pain of others. It is already the result of a general process of brutalization in the culture and it helps further inure the population to suffering....

"Revenge as a central motif; the loose use of words like 'kill'; approving references to sadism and torture—where could we be but in post-September 11 America, where bloody-mindedness has apparently become the stuff of polite dinner parties in Washington, New York and elsewhere?"

Disorientation, panic and a sense of being overwhelmed by events grip a good many people, not only in fundamentalist circles, but in the pseudo-artistic world as well. American society and culture, in grave crisis, are vomiting up everything retrograde, diseased and long-since discredited.

And the critics? Oh, the critics can always be counted upon! "Brilliant," writes one prominent figure. "Savage, sexy and ferociously funny," says another. A third: "I loved it, I loved it, I loved it."

In the future, looking back at the cultural landscape of our time, people will simply shake their heads.



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