

Why are they smirking?

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Mr. & Mrs. Smith, directed by Doug Liman, written by Simon Kinberg

From time to time readers will write in to the WSWS and criticize what they perceive to be our relentlessly “negative” attitude toward mainstream films. “Don’t you like anything?” they ask somewhat plaintively. One reader asserted recently that filmgoers, after all, want “to check their brain at the door” when they enter the theater. We sincerely hope that he changes his views. In the long run, we suspect, the individual who willingly chooses to check his brain at the door of the cinema or in any other public space will not find the critical and probing efforts of this site to his liking.

For those who have not given up their right to think and feel with some depth, commercial filmmaking offers a rather bleak prospect at the moment. And, unhappily, mere chance does not operate in the cultural world as it does in other spheres. Reviewing films is not like tossing a coin. For every five poor films or worse, let’s say, the law of averages does not guarantee an equal number of works of distinction, or *even one*.

There *are* periods of almost universal official stupidity and mediocrity, when heads, or at least certain prominent heads, appear to have emptied out. One has to wage war against the dominant trends and, if one’s limited powers make any difference, help clear the path for something better.

There is no particular pleasure to be taken in describing the obvious failings of obviously flawed or even truly deplorable films. One feels a certain amount of sympathy for the actors and film industry workers trapped in stupid, time-wasting productions. But softening the critical hostility to the latter will not help the most sensitive and intelligent elements find a way out of their present predicament.

And one should not forget that the American media and entertainment establishment oversees and profits from these bloated film projects to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars; the same establishment that accepted the hijacking of a presidential election, the assault on

democratic norms and the launching of an illegal, murderous war without so much as an artistic murmur; the same establishment that works night and day to poison the intelligence of the people, pollute the social atmosphere and degrade every aspect of social life.

One would find it easier to tolerate a *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*, for example, if it were the exception, if its appearance coincided with the opening of five films that actually looked at life in an interesting or thoughtful manner. But the opposite is the case: insofar as the *Mr. & Mrs. Smiths* absorb intellectual, technical and financial resources, those others do not see the light of day—the two categories are mutually exclusive, produced by opposed tendencies and social impulses.

At the WSWS we will continue to take filmmaking seriously and demand a great deal of it. And if that means almost continuously and relentlessly raising our voices against what is being offered, we claim only one defense: *it’s not our fault*.

Mr. & Mrs. Smith is the witless new “action comedy” directed by Doug Liman (*Go, The Bourne Identity*), in which Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie play a prosperous suburban couple, John and Jane Smith, each of whom, unbeknownst to the other, operates as an assassin for an unnamed intelligence agency (whether private or public remains unclear, as well as unimportant). When it comes to the attention of the powers that be that these superstar professional murderers are married, they are deliberately set against one another on a course of mutual destruction. Much merriment and mayhem ensues.

In the midst of their frantic attempts to eliminate one another, Jane and John come to realize the deep love they continue to share and join forces against their tormentors. They come out on top of course, with only a few bruises and scrapes, having worked through their frustrations and resentments with the aid of the most advanced firepower available. The film is book-ended by the pair’s visits to a marriage counselor, where they glibly discuss their problems as though they were an average married couple.

What clever and original soul came up with this

concept? How is it that contemporary Hollywood is so lacking in intelligence, dramatic sense and, frankly, good taste that such a project even reached the initial planning stage?

Let's leave aside the fact that *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*, half-jocularly of course, condones the government (or proxies for the government) torturing and assassinating its enemies. Let's leave aside its glamorization of murderers for hire. Let's leave aside its conformism and worship of wealth and fashion and the "beautiful people." Let's leave aside its profound self-satisfaction, its narrative's absurdities ... Well, on second thought, perhaps we can't leave all that aside, because that doesn't leave much to discuss.

As an action picture, *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* surely cannot satisfy. It is neither suspenseful nor exciting. The weaponry and technologies have been seen before in one or two, or was it thirty-five, similar films. This is a work going through the motions in nearly every regard.

As a black comedy Liman's film has the most potential. But like nearly every contemporary work the script and direction rapidly destroy those possibilities with ridiculous exaggeration and lack of balance. The film's facetious "over the top" approach obliterates, pointlessly, any contact with reality along with the innumerable bodies, vehicles and buildings. One largely stops caring. That *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* has a handful of comic moments, and perhaps five or six recognizably human situations, is hardly a consolation.

Pitt, a talented actor, is misused or misuses himself here. Jolie too presumably has talent. One can hardly remember; since having the misfortune to become one of the film industry's leading glamour girls she has been condemned to appear in one awful film after another. In *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* she pouts, scowls, or opens her eyes wide and then smiles, all to little or no effect.

Are the film's goings-on intended as a metaphor for the married state? Are we to see in the Smiths' tumultuous relationship a particularly frenzied and heightened cautionary tale? It can be said that in many cases husbands and wives don't really know one another, keep secrets and build up resentments that, in extreme cases, may assume physically violent or even murderous proportions.

But with the remarkable insensitivity and obtuseness that dominates in Hollywood, accentuated by wealth and the influence of a brutalized society, the filmmakers have rendered the parallel between the Smiths' turmoil and ordinary married life null and void. It's one thing for

Buster Keaton to approach a girl, whose behavior has maddened him, and instead of strangling, embrace her. It's quite another when the Smiths attempt to run over, incinerate and fill one another with bullet-holes. It isn't amusing or telling, it's bizarre and unpleasant. And when they subsequently jump into one another's arms, that isn't endearing or pointed, it's simply disquieting. Murder, beatings, maimings, even fictional ones (as well as ludicrous superhero stunts and posturings) mean something, they connote something. They can't be laughed off, like a black eye or a bruised lip.

What one remembers most about *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*, because all the violent episodes tend to blend forgettably into one, is the sight of Pitt and Jolie on the therapist's couch, smiling and looking pleased with themselves. Of course within the film's structure the joke is on the doctor. Little does *he know* who he's dealing with! Two top-notch assassins acting like a normal married couple. But there's something more to the smirking than that, unfortunately. The scene, no doubt unwittingly, also conveys the filmmakers' and performers' amusement at the thought of two film stars acting for a moment like "ordinary people."

Are they smirking at their \$5 million, \$10 million or \$15 million salaries, at their "fabulous lifestyles," at their being celebrities in celebrity-mad America? One hopes not. In any event, considering that the film is relatively worthless, that the performers make too many worthless films, that people will look back on these films—perhaps including they themselves—with shame, really there is nothing to smile about.



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