Superman Returns, Pirates II, Clerks II: No 'fount of impressions and emotions' at present

David Walsh, Joanne Laurier
27 July 2006

Superman Returns, directed by Bryan Singer, screenplay by Michael Dougherty and Dan Harris; *Clerks II*, written and directed by Kevin Smith; *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*, directed by Gore Verbinski, screenplay by Ted Elliott and Terry Rossio

Popular culture is in a bad way. For the most part, it's not lively, or astonishing, or intelligent. It doesn't generally amuse or move. There was a time when audiences found in the cinema, for example, something astonishing, something to be grateful for, something to cherish. It was, as Trotsky wrote, "that inexhaustible fount of impressions and emotions."

Human beings are resilient and eternally hopeful creatures. Although perhaps in diminished numbers, moviegoers continue to troop to the theaters. An expectant hush falls over the crowd as each film begins. Even the most cold-eyed skeptic, or critic, wants to be entertained. There really is no point in going if you simply anticipate rubbish.

A few minutes of most films, unhappily, is enough to convince the spectator that this is only more of the same. Disappointment, mild or otherwise, sets in. The audience settles down, in many case, to simply endure the afternoon or evening. On leaving, one often feels relief, an onerous task accomplished.

Popular culture has a rich history in the US, in part no doubt because of the mix of nationalities and traditions. The silent cinema became a fact of everyday life for masses of immigrants crowded into cities in the early part of the twentieth century because it did not require them to understand English. Ironically, the lack of independent working class political life in America has also resulted in a great deal of inarticulate outrage, sadness, joy and despair, which found more or less conscious expression elsewhere, being channeled into popular culture.

There have consistently been artists and performers whose emotions and thoughts went far beyond the individual, summing up vast and often painful social experiences. A comprehensive picture of American life over the past century or more would be almost impossible to construct without taking into account popular music, film, dance, theater and other forms.

There is no reason to expect every song or film to be a work of genius. Great works emerge in circumstances where there are many good works and a creative, critical atmosphere. Hollywood films, popular music and theater for decades produced works that made people laugh and cry, and even think.

The 'average' film studio production of the 1930s, 1940s and even into the 1950s, was made with greater skill and texture than at present. Writers, directors and performers, not yet 'celebrities' in the contemporary sense, were engaged in life and reproduced that engagement in more or less artful form—of course with varying degrees of sincerity and complexity. There have always been hacks and philistines aplenty.

To gain their social bearings people need energetic and engaging pictures of life. Art, including popular art, ought to provide such pictures. At present the images and sounds provided by film and popular music in the US are extremely limited, weak, unenlightening. And this has nothing to do with the supposed seriousness or non-seriousness of the genre. Foolishness can also be illuminating, as well as sensuality and adventure and suspense.

Tastes in popular culture differ. They have a great deal to do with immediate family and geographical circumstances, the 'mood' of one's generation and so on. There's virtually no point in arguing with someone about his or her opinions about popular music, for example. They are usually embedded in the experiences of adolescence and early adulthood as in granite.

However, there is something heartfelt and elevating in figures as disparate as Cole Porter, the Marx Brothers, Hank Williams, Marilyn Monroe and Aretha Franklin. There are not many figures about whom that can be said within the current 'entertainment industry,' composed primarily of market products imposed on a defenseless, somewhat dazed public.

As though the talent in Hollywood were not already stretched thinly enough, the major studios have begun laying off workers. Walt Disney has announced plans to cut 650 jobs, revamp its Burbank studio and reduce the number of films it makes. Recent moves by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Inc. and DreamWorks SKG resulted in the loss of another 1,350 positions. Revolution Studios has "significantly downsized its ranks and ambitions after too many box-office misses. Disney dramatically scaled back its Miramax Film specialty unit from the mini-studio that it had been under its founders, Bob and Harvey Weinstein. And Time Warner Inc.'s Warner Bros. cut about 400 jobs." (*Los Angeles Times*)

A Wall Street analyst told the *Times*, "The media companies don't like it as much as they used to. They don't see it as a prime engine of growth anymore, so they're farming out as much of the risk as they can to private-equity and hedge-fund partners. They are just not as interested in throwing additional capital into the business." In response, producer Brian Grazer commented, "It's as if the managerial elite has made a secret pact to adhere to certain business principles that they want to enforce on agents and artists. That's never happened in the 25 years I've been producing."

The iron rule of this managerial elite, to whom the immediate bottom line is everything, will only further deepen the artistic crisis in the film industry. There will be even less margin for maneuver, even less room for experimentation and controversy, an even more relentless pursuit of the bland, bombastic blockbuster ('Oh,' think the financiers, 'if the film studios could only produce each year a single $10 billion-dollar film that would earn $50 billion worldwide!'). The process will also accelerate the emergence of artistic alternatives, born in deep hostility to the deadening corporate dominance of filmmaking.

Superman Returns, directed by Bryan Singer, is not the worst of today's

entertainments, but interest in it eventually collapses under the weight of the film's self-seriousness and overbearing special effects.

Superman (Brandon Routh) returns to earth after five years' absence to discover the planet in as much difficulty as ever and his former love, Lois Lane (Kate Bosworth), possessed of a child. Superman's alter ego, Clark Kent, resumes his job at the *Daily Planet*, alongside Lois, where he goes mysteriously unrecognized as the superhero. Arch-criminal Lex Luthor (Kevin Spacey), accompanied by his latest nitwit girl-friend, Kitty (Parker Posey), has plans to bring a new continent into being in the Atlantic Ocean (and submerge much of North America) thanks to crystals from the planet Krypton, which he discovers in Superman's arctic lair. Needless to say ...

The film begins pleasantly and concretely enough. Routh and Bosworth are not especially dynamic, but they exude a certain charm and intelligence.

For some reason, however, Singer and his screenwriters, Michael Dougherty and Dan Harris, proceed to turn the comic book hero into a Christlike figure. We are reminded that Superman's father on Krypton, Jor-El, "sent his only son" to do good on Earth. In Superman's absence, Lois has written a Pulitzer Prize-winning essay on "Why the World Doesn't Need Superman." In a pivotal scene, Lois returns to this theme: "The world doesn't need a savior ..." Superman asks her to listen. "I don't hear anything," says Lois. Superman responds, "I hear everything. You wrote that the world doesn't need a savior, but every day I hear people crying for one."

Indeed, it turns out that the world, descending into crime and chaos, is very much in need of saving. This seems an unhappy theme at this moment in history (although perhaps unsurprising). Did the filmmakers bother to think about the matter, or did they simply conclude this would represent a clever twist? Even in a film based on a comic book, the notion that human beings are essentially helpless and in need of rescue from above seems irresponsible.

Or as one Christian web site has it, "Lois Lane may claim, 'The world doesn't need a savior' but the headlines betray her. We understand Lois's bitterness. We share her abandonment. How could something like 9/11 happen? Where was God when the buildings burned? It is easy to lose faith when the victims of terrorism tumble to their deaths. Yet amidst the gnawing doubt arise the pleas of the people. Lois says she doesn't need a savior, but Superman's finely-tuned ears confirm that 'Everyday I hear them crying out for one.'"

Having avoided in this manner a drama that would in some fashion address itself to compelling contemporary human issues, instead of this lazy supernaturalism, it is hardly surprising that Singer and his screenwriters turn, in the end, to another kind of *deus ex machina*, cinematic special effects, to solve their artistic problems. The last portion of the film, taking place on or around Luthor's new continent arising out of the Atlantic, is simply tedious.

Clerks II, directed by Kevin Smith, is a dreadful film. Its story about a couple of New Jersey natives who work in a fast-food restaurant is witless and vulgar. Badly written, directed and acted, it sheds no light on anything. This is American 'independent' filmmaking at its worst. Only Rosario Dawson escapes the wreckage.

The film takes up the lives of its two protagonists, Randal (Jeff Anderson) and Dante (Brian O'Halloran), ten years or so after Smith first created a drama around them, the original *Clerks*. Forced by a fire to relocate from their original jobs, the pair end up at the McDonald's-like Mooby's. Brian is about to move to Florida where he's to be married and handed a new house by his in-laws. Responsibility and adulthood loom. Randal has a foul mouth and abuses, with varying degrees of nastiness, everyone around him. He regrets Brian's departure. Becky (Dawson), the manager, and Brian have feelings for each other. Will Brian leave New Jersey for Florida and a conventional life?

There is not a compelling or convincing moment in the film. Smith's guiding principles seem to be informality, looseness, 'anything goes.' Unfortunately, intellectual laziness and sloppiness are poor principles in any field. They produce nothing of value. Nor is the vulgarity on display transgressive or audacious, but simply sophomoric and unpleasant. The film panders to the worst in its targeted youthful audience. Smith's film, in fact, is congealed pandering. No one has the right to be proud of such an achievement.

A previous WSWS reviewer of a Smith film, *Dogma*, entitled his comment, "A mind so open that the brain fell out." One can hardly improve on that.

After his Oscar-nominated performance as Captain Jack Sparrow in the first *Pirates of the Caribbean*: *The Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003), Johnny Depp reunites with Orlando Bloom and Keira Knightley in *Pirates of the Caribbean*: *Dead Man's Chest*, the second episode of what promises to be a trilogy.

Gore Verbinski again directs, from a screenplay by Ted Elliott and Terry Rossio. Extending nearly two and a half hours, the film is ponderous and self-important, thereby breaking ranks with the first *Pirates*, a silly but refreshing work with sufficient imagination to conjure up the ghost of Robert Louis Stevenson.

In developing his androgynous Sparrow, Depp revealed in an interview in 2003 that he had to buck the film's producers, who were nervous about how the actor's unconventional approach would affect the film's box office. Reviewing *The Curse of the Black Pearl*, the WSWS wrote: "[Depp's] elementary choices, which contributed greatly to elevating the character out of the ranks of the ordinary and clichéd, were seen as eccentric and potentially dangerous to the film's financial success!"

One way or another, in the second film calculated commercial interests, which are generally guaranteed to kill off genuine audience enthusiasm have won out.

While the first installment, *Curse of the Black Pearl*, benefited not only from Depp's Sparrow, but also from Geoffrey Rush's Barbossa—Sparrow's arch-nemesis—the new film is short on interesting characters and dialogue and long on pyrotechnics and plot convolution. Matched against an endless procession of generic rivals, Jack Sparrow, much less hypnotic than the first time around, comes across as an isolated whirling dervish. An exception to the film's dull characters is Will Turner's long-lost father, played by Stellan Skarsgard, who injects a much needed dose of the human.

Additionally, the first *Pirates* pitted Jack against the British authorities. As a roguish thorn in their side, Sparrow spent a good part of the film avoiding the noose. His anti-establishment deeds were amusing and spontaneous, coming as they did with the warning never to trust a pirate.

Taking a number of steps back, *Dead Man's Chest* has Jack fighting Davy Jones (Bill Nighy), the personification of death at the bottom of the sea. When the British Empire makes an appearance in the form of a rogue element—the nasty Cutler Beckett played by the talented Tom Hollander—it does so essentially as a plot contrivance, further adding to the leaden quality of the film. In a final tilt to commercialism, the film ends by heavy-handedly foreshadowing the third *Pirates* film, slated to be released in 2007.