

One-quarter or one-third of an understanding: *Breaking and Entering*; not much of anything: *Breach*

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Breaking and Entering, written and directed by Anthony Minghella; *Breach*, directed by Billy Ray, screenplay by Ray, Adam Mazer and William Rotko

Anthony Minghella's *Breaking and Entering* is a film about contemporary London, a city that, like New York, has been ravaged in recent decades by the very wealthy. Often arrogant, shortsighted and stupid, the *nouveau riche* have infested important areas of both cities, driving up real estate prices, driving out working class populations and generally undermining the quality of life. They have placed their stamp on these metropolises in the form of their architecture, gathering places and shops and, above all, staggering levels of social inequality.

According to the London Child Poverty Commission, Britain's capital has the highest rate of child poverty in the country. After housing costs are taken into account, nearly 40 percent of children are living beneath the poverty line, "over 600,000 children, compared with 28 per cent of children in Great Britain.... Unemployment in families is one of the major factors in child poverty in London. London's high cost of living, including travel, housing and childcare have a major impact on incomes of parents. Fifty nine per cent of all children in poverty are in workless households....

"Barriers to paid work, inadequate access to appropriate and affordable childcare and discrimination can disadvantage some sections of the population. These groups include some people from black and minority ethnic communities, lone parents and disabled people. As a result, children in these groups face increased chances of living in poverty....

"Of the ethnic groups for which there are data and information, the highest risk of child poverty by far is in the combined Pakistani/Bangladeshi group. Poverty affects nearly 70 per cent of the children in these communities in London. London's Pakistani and Bangladeshi community experience high levels of unemployment, discrimination in relation to ethnicity, faith and culture. The availability of appropriate and affordable childcare is significant...."

At the other end of the economic scale, the *Sunday Times* calculated in 2005 that 503 of the 1,000 wealthiest people in Britain lived in London or its surrounding areas. *The New Statesman* observed at the time, "London is said to have 40 billionaires, 13 of whom are foreign. There is no place in the world like it. They are welcomed with open arms. The capital has become the world's most significant tax haven. Theirs is a parallel world, in which the purveyors of yachts, private jets and other accoutrements cannot keep up with demand. Where else in the world could you acquire a diamond-encrusted swimsuit for £15 million?"

Filmmaker Anthony Minghella has not addressed himself directly to this social situation in his film, nor was he obliged to. The existence of these dramatically opposed social poles, however, plays a role in the unfolding of the drama.

Breaking and Entering, Will Francis (Jude Law) is a successful landscape architect, whose firm is participating in some fashion or another in the "regeneration" of the King's Cross area in central London, which, according to a local government web site, is "one of the largest and most complex" such programs in Europe. It involves the development of a transport interchange, including a Channel Tunnel Rail Link, which by 2020 is expected to accommodate 60 million passengers a year.

After the rail link is built, "the surrounding lands...could become one of the largest mixed-use brown-field redevelopment's in the UK.... [T]his £2Billion new urban quarter would have a major impact on the wider area and bring significant change to both boroughs." Obviously, a great deal of money is involved. Inevitably in such cases, the interests of the local population is somewhere near the bottom of the list.

Minghella (*Cold Mountain*, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*) has set his film in the midst of this process, attempting to demonstrate the effect of people from quite different social and geographical circumstances ending up "lassoed" together, as he explained to an interviewer.

Francis is involved with a Swedish-American woman, Liv (Robin Wright Penn), who has a 13-year-old autistic daughter, Bea (Poppy Rogers), from a previous relationship. Will and Liv are having difficulties. Their relations, as drawn by Minghella, are rather stereotyped. He is work-obsessed (although suffering from increasing doubts about his vision for a new London) and somewhat uncommitted; she is passive-aggressive and seems vaguely resentful.

British theatre and film (and American to a lesser extent) have been full of such couples for the past several decades. Male characters like Will generally start on their knees, guilty of some past crime, indiscretion or failing. It's somewhat tiresome and artificial, a defensive concession to an uncritical and taken-for-granted feminism. It hasn't helped male or female artists. If an individual mistreats someone or acts badly, then we should see it presented dramatically, and he should be held accountable, but this vague sense of "original sin" surrounding the male figures in such works misplaces the source of the difficulties, which lies in the social relations themselves. Artists need to work from life, not the assumptions of certain middle class circles.

Francis and his partner, Sandy (Martin Freeman), have their "state-of-the-art" studio broken into repeatedly. They decided to stake out the place themselves. In the course of their vigil, an eastern European prostitute (Vera Farmiga) makes herself at home in their parked automobile. Eventually their watchfulness pays off; they catch Miro (Rafi Gavron), a young Bosnian immigrant and member of a gang of thieves, in the act. Will chases him and sees where he lives, with his mother, Amira (Juliette Binoche). He finds an excuse to pay a visit to the house, where Amira works as a tailor. She knows nothing about her son's activities. Will and she eventually become involved.

The police enter the picture. Things get more complicated on every front. Is Amira (who finally figures out what her son is up to and why Will has come into her life) continuing the sexual relationship with the architect as a kind of bribe to prevent him from turning in her son, or does she truly care for him? In the end, at a kind of reconciliation hearing, virtually everyone is given a second chance.

Like a good many contemporary films, Minghella's work is only partially developed. Hints of bigger social realities are present. One character, a goodhearted policeman (played by Ray Winstone), explains, "There's one law for them and one law for us," referring to the rich and poor. The plights of displaced people and of teenagers in trouble are treated with genuine sympathy.

In an interview, Minghella speaks somewhat abstractly about the present era "as a huge hinge in Western civilisation, good or bad, something extraordinary and convulsive is happening.... I want to try and understand what's going on right now and I think the city is some kind of articulation of what we aspire to as civilised people and how dysfunctional that aspiration has become." (*Theblurb.com*)

A good many artists are in the same boat: they are beginning to sense intuitively that "something extraordinary and convulsive is happening," but haven't the social or historical insight to make enough of it. Even in the new circumstances, they fall back on more-familiar (and often trite) contrivances: the unhappy or unsatisfying marriage and the impact of a love affair; the parents or parent struggling with a difficult child; or the individual who needs to "commit" or "accept responsibility," etc.—in short, purely personal matters, or what are perceived to be purely personal matters. The social and individual elements are held apart, each suffering from the distance.

Or they are joined arbitrarily, by a type of no doubt well-intentioned, but merely liberal-minded politics. Minghella speaks of the "issue of reconciliation," that in his film "not only would a marriage be reconciled, but that a series of social wounds would get healed." (*Aintitcool.com*) One can think of a number of films, guided by varying degrees of artistic and social seriousness, that make artificial links between social and individual behavior, at the expense of a richer examination of contemporary life: *Crash*, *Babel*, *Caché*, *L'Enfant* and so forth.

Breaking and Entering suffers from a schematism. Minghella has a conception of things, but it only loosely fits reality. His inventions, for the most part, fail to satisfy entirely. They rely a bit too much on clichés. His Bosnian refugee, Amira, is congealed anxiety and discomfort. Often people get on with their lives, without a great deal of fuss. We are not allowed to forget for a moment her history. Her desperation becomes a little tiring. Her in-laws, so to speak, Bosnian Serbs, are inevitably brutish. Winstone could hardly be broader as a London cop. It goes on. The qualities of almost every character are overdrawn, tied up too neatly. The piece lacks spontaneity. There are some genuine moments between Liv (Robin Wright Penn is a remarkable performer) and her daughter.

Minghella seems sincere in his efforts, but how close is he to the underlying social realities? London seethes with contradictions, which cannot be reconciled or "healed" within the existing social and economic set-up. The premise of reconciliation, a false one, leads the artist astray. It would be better to treat life and reality more directly. Here things feel too often as though they are being dealt with at second- or third-hand.

However, that would not mean treating life more pessimistically, or cynically, or despairingly, as certain of the film's critics seem to imply. One such speaks of the "preposterous altruism" of the final moments in *Breaking and Entering*. No act of kindness or generosity is preposterous. I think the criticism here is directed against the strongest element in Minghella's film, some belief in the ability of human beings to empathize and act on their empathy. Law communicates this effectively.

Again, as with so many films over the past two years, elements of the old and elements of the new are mingled in a confused fashion. The

contagion of selfishness, individualism and greed is giving way to something else, but the artists are unclear about many things. And their own material conditions, their upper middle class status, makes clarification more difficult.

Breach is a forgettable work. It aims to recount the downfall of Robert Hanssen, the FBI agent who sold spies to the Soviet Union and then Russia for more than two decades until his arrest in February 2001. Hanssen had no apparent ideological motive, although he once claimed that British spy Kim Philby was a hero of his. He spied because of personal resentment at FBI officials who failed to recognize his genius and, mostly, because of money. Soviet and Russian agents paid him some \$1.4 million over the course of his spying career.

In *Breach*, Hanssen (Chris Cooper) is portrayed as an unpleasant, psychologically disturbed individual, a follower of the arch-Catholic Opus Dei sect who also films himself and his wife having sex and distributes the videos to friends. Eric O'Neill (Ryan Phillippe) is placed in his office to keep an eye on him. O'Neill is not told the real reasons for the surveillance; he is led to believe by his superior (Laura Linney) that the bureau is worried about Hanssen's sexual "deviancy."

In any event, O'Neill ultimately learns the truth and helps bring about Hanssen's arrest.

Breach sheds no light on any of the potentially fascinating material. Cooper is a talented actor, but he is given little to work with here. The film prides itself on not being able to explain anything about Hanssen's activities.

We are not in Graham Greene or John Le Carré territory. The film could hardly be more conformist politically and ideologically. The filmmakers and reviewers discuss Hanssen as a "traitor" without batting an eyelash. A title at the end suggests that he may have been responsible for the deaths of three or more CIA or American intelligence agents. Much of the world's population, from bitter experience or historical knowledge, looks on the CIA and the US intelligence apparatus generally as a machine for provocation and mass murder. Hanssen is not a figure to admire, but his pursuers were not made of better human material.



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