

# Two poor US efforts: *Disturbia* and *Georgia Rule*

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*Disturbia*, directed by D.J. Caruso, screenplay by Christopher Landon and Carl Ellsworth; *Georgia Rule*, directed by Garry Marshall, screenplay by Mark Andrus

*Disturbia* is a miserable film, largely uninteresting and unconvincing. Nonetheless, the film was number one at the box office its opening weekend and has since grossed well more than its production costs. There may be a certain response to the pent-up desires of the teenager depicted in the movie, along with the general lack of alternatives at theaters.

Critics, however, have also been quite supportive, going so far as to compare *Disturbia* favorably to Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*. The latter provided certain elements of the plot for *Disturbia*, but the tension, environment and characters of the Hitchcock film are nowhere to be found in the new film.

In the opening scene of *Disturbia*, directed by D.J. Caruso, a father and son are fly-fishing in a gorgeous Western landscape. Soon they are headed home, with the son, Kale (Shia LaBeouf), driving. A violent and spectacular car crash occurs, rendered in exquisite detail; Kale manages to save himself, but his father is killed.

Perhaps the most interesting scene of the entire movie follows: we are shown a somewhat clichéd high school classroom setting, except that one student—Kale—is quite realistically sitting with his hooded head down on the desk. When asked a question, he can scarcely respond, or just doesn't even care. His teacher cruelly intones, "What would your father think?" and receives a punch in the face from Kale.

For this he is put under house arrest for the summer, enforced by an electronic ankle bracelet that alerts the police any time he leaves the area of his house. The filmmaker here has touched upon quite interesting material—a school system that apparently provides no support for students with problems, and in fact ridicules them; a justice system that punishes them severely for

predictable outbursts of rage and alienation.

All this is quickly dropped in favor of topics far more captivating to tabloid journalists and, sadly, too many American filmmakers: beautiful people and serial killers. Stuck at home, Kale becomes fascinated by Ashley (Sarah Roemer) who moves in next door. She looks like a model and is one in real life. Significant time is devoted to him spying on her (aided by her frequent outdoor swims and prances) and their eventual relationship. This is paired with unusually brazen shots of Xbox games, a Mac computer, iTunes, an iPod and other current technology.

Everyday life for millions of youth almost creeps in at this point, albeit through a very privileged and distorted lens. The suburbs shown in the film are well-off, Kale's house is quite large and exhibits original design far different than that usually found in mass-produced suburban neighborhoods. Ashley has use of her mother's SUV, a \$50,000 BMW, and also doesn't have to work over the summer. No outside concerns, economic or social, are ever presented.

Shia LaBeouf as Kale shows some liveliness and humor, but an attempt to pass off Ashley as more than the expected pretty face falls flat. When Ashley holds a high school drinking party, Kale complains that she's "conformed," and argues that swimming, reading unnamed books on the roof and staring deeply and seriously at herself in the mirror make her unlike the others. We're apparently expected to believe this.

Kale also has a friend named Ronny who plays a standardized comedic role. The three band together against another neighbor, Robert Turner, who seems like he might be a murderer. In every encounter he is certainly treated like one by the teens, aided by background music, leaving the viewer little room for doubt.

A lack of obvious evidence delays the revelation that Robert Turner is a serial killer—yet when it is revealed, Turner's ordinary suburban house is shown to be

customized for mass torture and murder. There are seemingly multiple floors to Turner's dungeon-like basement, one area is even filled with putrid water, a sterile white room holds freezers of weapons and devices, another has an organized collection of victims' personal belongings, and finally, several are full of corpses. These scenes are more reminiscent of state torture than the secret chambers of a bachelor's well-off suburban home.

In any event, things progress from there. Somehow everyone, except Turner, is in fine psychological shape at the comforting end of the movie.

A crumbling upper middle class family finds moral salvation in the form of idyllic rural America—this is the sleek conclusion of *Georgia Rule*, directed by veteran Garry Marshall. Yet the rural America it proudly displays is hardly believable, much less the answer to the litany of social ills that current society spawns. *Georgia Rule* leaves little lasting impression.

The opening scene shows well-heeled Lily (Felicity Huffman) in a glittering Mercedes arguing with her daughter, Rachel (Lindsay Lohan), who is walking alongside the car on an empty road in Idaho. Rachel demands that her mother take off without her, and, in fact, she is left to walk the 17 miles to her grandmother's house. Lily has arranged for her daughter to stay there over the summer before she enters college, in hopes that Georgia (Jane Fonda) can straighten her out. It's quickly obvious that the three women can't bear each other's company.

Rachel proceeds to grate obnoxiously against Hull, Idaho: breaking her Grandmother's rules, pushing the Mormon Harlan (Garret Hedlund) into his first sexual experience and annoying the local doctor Simon (Dermot Mulroney.) The quick-witted and precocious attitude of Rachel makes these quite enjoyable and compelling scenes. At a ludicrous small-town Americana parade, Rachel suddenly tells Simon she has been molested for years by her stepfather, Arnold (Cary Elwes). Georgia finds out, Lily desperately races back from her home in California, and a major crisis ensues. Lily is alcoholic and confused about her husband, while Rachel vacillates between fun escapades and bouts of family conflict.

All the while Georgia is stern, washing out various mouths for blasphemy and obsessively destroying Lily's liquor supply. Arnold matter-of-factly states that Rachel is lying, convincing Lily, and leaves his brand-new Ferrari behind for Rachel to show his 'forgiveness.' This ploy fails when Lily realizes the Ferrari is a payoff, thus proving Arnold's guilt. He is scared off by the three

women, along with upstanding Simon and Harlan. Here too everything apparently works out.

The issue of child molestation is a serious one, with traumatizing effects for its victims. However, it has become the catch-all explanation for too many social ills and psychotic episodes in the US, especially in film and television. Moreover, the artistic treatment of the guilty parties is generally stereotyped—these are inherently diseased individuals who need to be locked away forever.

*Georgia Rule* breaks no new ground in this regard. Nothing is truly or deeply explained. Arnold states that Lily's nightly drunkenness led him to the bedroom of his stepdaughter—but why does he choose her instead of an emotional and intellectual equivalent his age? Is he just naturally "sick"? Rachel scarcely questions the matter and everyone else is simply joyful that he will be imprisoned.

Every difficulty is resolved by the wholesome purity of Hull and its residents. The main street is busy with healthy and attractive residents heading into the town hardware store, food stores, etc. Presumably here somehow jobs have not disappeared and worldwide chain stores and restaurants have not moved in to wipe out local business. Georgia and seemingly everyone else is patriotic, religious, and content. By coming back, Rachel and Lily have saved themselves from the social problems of a California metropolis. But these problems—and much larger ones—permeate both city and country. A phony turn towards the "values" of the idyllic countryside neither reveals nor solves a thing.



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