

A letter on the “Cool/Cruel Britannia” trend

21 March 2008

The WSWS received the following letter on “Cool/Cruel Britannia,” in response to a review of In Bruges.

Thanks for your very thoughtful review of Martin McDonagh’s film, *In Bruges*. For several years I have followed the rather misanthropic, despairing and nihilistic Cool/Cruel Britannia theatrical-literary trend. From Scottish novelist Irvine Welsh or playwright Gregory Burke to Sarah Kane and McDonagh, we are presented with bleak and brutal social landscapes populated by the depraved, the disaffected and the disillusioned—places where the “world is shite”; where dysfunction, inhumanity and debauchery rule unopposed.

If there is any attempt to portray actions meant to change the world, it is presented to us in the form of terrorism. Welsh gives us a secret network of thalidomide victims in his revenge novella, *Fortune’s Always Hiding*. Burke offers up a soccer hooligan and a confused anarchist protesting globalization through kidnap and murder in *Gagarin Way*, whilst McDonagh has more than once featured Irish terrorists bumbling through his work.

But what characterizes this trend in its essence is an unrelenting attempt to replace any sort of social or indeed even psycho-social analysis with an ever escalating shock and awe perfectly encapsulated by the depiction of rape and cannibalism quoted by Walsh from Sarah Kane’s play, *Blasted*. And underlying all the blood and excrement and pain in these works, is an understanding that things are inexplicable. That, in the end, nothing at all can be done.

Several months ago I had the opportunity to view a performance in Toronto of McDonagh’s most recent hit play, *The Pillowman*. The piece, set in an Eastern European-like police torture chamber, depicts the interrogation of a writer who has produced a voluminous collection of short stories centered around the unspeakable torture and murder of little children.

McDonagh spares no amount of hideous detail in his play. We are treated to jocularly mimicked screams of a five-year-old having razor blades shoved down her throat. Another child has his toes cut off one by one. Another little girl is flogged, speared and crucified by her parents. Yet another, the accused writer himself, is forced to endure an entire childhood listening to the nightly screams of a sibling apparently being tortured with an electric drill, also by the children’s parents.

And to what end? McDonagh wants us to know, in the best postmodernist tradition, that one “narrative” is just as legitimate as the next. After all, one cannot hope to even approximate any kind of objective truth and, following from this, humanity, being incapable of ever understanding the world, certainly cannot contemplate changing it.

I must admit being gratified by the number of audience members that night who left before the end of the show, and by the smattering of polite applause at its end. It was certainly a very different response than the gushing tributes for the piece coming from the theatre critics at the major newspapers in London and New York.

There are many unspeakable things occurring in this world and writers must not shy away from grappling with them. But one can only do this with an understanding, indeed a respect, for history and for the scientific analysis of our economy, our society and our psyches.

And if artists do that, they just might see that there is a flip side to the depravities of war and poverty and a system that puts bottom lines on accountants’ ledgers above human life. They will see that people’s experiences also bring yearnings and that those yearnings are intimately bound up with society’s own development. That self-sacrifice and collective action can move the world forward. And that despite our imperfections, despite our personal tragedies, we are entirely capable of changing the world.

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