The Visitor: “Human” or “political”?

David Walsh
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Written and directed by Tom McCarthy

In Tom McCarthy’s *The Visitor*, the life of a widowed economics professor merely going through the motions intersects with those of several undocumented immigrants in New York City.

Walter Vale (Richard Jenkins) teaches in Connecticut, but has kept the apartment in New York where he once lived with his wife. When he reluctantly agrees to deliver a paper in the city at a conference on the global economy (although officially co-author of the paper, he had little to do with its writing), Walter is obliged to make use of his old residence there. He discovers, however, that Tarek (Haaz Sleiman), a young Syrian-born musician, and Zainab (Danai Gurira), a jewelry maker from Senegal, have moved in, the victims of a real estate scam.

When he realizes they have no place to stay, Walter invites the couple to stay on in his apartment. He develops a friendship with Tarek in which music plays a large role. Walter’s wife was a concert pianist, and he has been attempting without success to learn how to play the instrument. He finds a more natural affinity for the *djembe*, the West African drum Tarek favors. They practice and play together, both in Walter’s apartment and in Central Park along with others.

Tragedy strikes. Mistakenly detained by police for not paying his fare in the subway, Tarek is rapidly locked away in a windowless, privately run detention center in Queens along with 300 other undocumented immigrants, one of many such prisons in America’s internal gulag. His mother, Mouna (Hiam Abbass), unexpectedly shows up on Walter’s door from Michigan. Walter assures Mouna and Zainab that he has hired a lawyer and all will be well. He underestimates the difficulties.

The film has two strands: the expansion of Walter’s cramped inner life under the warm, vital influence of Tarek, drum-playing and, ultimately, Mouna, and the unfair, arbitrary character of the immigration process in the US and the targeting of Middle Eastern immigrants in particular.

This is the second film McCarthy has directed, following on *The Station Agent* in 2003. The two works have various elements in common: direct, straightforward dialogue, understated performances, a lack of bombast. His films seem to take their cue from a certain genre of contemporary American fiction writing, neo-realistic, pared-down and unassuming (even self-consciously so). *The Station Agent*, it seemed to me, proceeded “quietly and more or less intelligently,” however, it failed to make an “important interpretation of life” and ended up feeling “timid, cautious and unsatisfying.”

With this film, to his credit, McCarthy has adopted a more substantial theme. Recent events, combined with a trip to Lebanon and Oman with his first film (sponsored by the US State Department), have impelled him to make a film sympathetic to the plight of Middle Eastern and African immigrants caught up in a brutal dragnet. This is a global dilemma. Capitalism has made much of the world economically or politically uninhabitable, and it then punishes those fleeing impossible conditions.

Tarek tells Walter through a bullet-proof glass barrier: “This is not fair. I am not a criminal. I have committed no crime. What do they think, I’m a terrorist? There are no terrorists in here.”

In an interview, McCarthy explains that he wants to make “authentic and realistic” films and believes “audiences are looking for authenticity.” Referring to the sequences in the facility where Tarek is being held, he comments, “I do know that all of these experiences are, for me, personal experiences. They’re not fictional experiences. I lost my anger at a detention center. Much worse than Walter did. I went on the other side. The guy invited me back to continue the conversation and we were practically chest bumping. It was insane. I completely lost my cool.”

McCarthy adds later: “So there are political aspects to the script. But I sort of defy anyone to make a modern-day movie in New York and a thinking movie—a smart movie—without having a political element. I think that’s not only irresponsible, but it’s just unrealistic. I don’t know how you could have someone from another country in a movie in New York and not be dealing with some sort of political or social idea” (interview with Wajahat Ali).

These are spontaneous and humane responses to the present situation. The film is an extension of these

responses.

Richard Jenkins, born in DeKalb, Illinois, in 1947, is a good and fortunate choice for the role of Walter. The actor has been performing honorably in films and television since the mid-1970s, often as a lawyer, corporate executive or government official, even a general on occasion, in both drama and comedy. He has worked for a wide variety of directors, David O. Russell (memorably, in *Flirting With Disaster* and *I Heart Huckabees*), the Coen Brothers, the Farrelly Brothers and Mike Nichols on multiple occasions, also Woody Allen, Clint Eastwood and Lawrence Kasdan, on projects both good and bad. Jenkins was a regular on the television series "Six Feet Under" from 2001 to 2005.

He brings a considerable degree of intelligence and artistic restraint to McCarthy's film, as well as comic timing. When Walter explains to Mouna that her son has been teaching him to play the drum and she asks how that's been going, his response, "I sound a lot better when he's playing with me," is delivered with precisely the right mixture of earnestness, irony and self-deprecation.

Walter is an ordinary man, who, one imagines, has led his life without great upheaval. His devotion to Tarek's cause, however, is believable. Like many Americans, he holds certain principles of fairness quite strongly and deeply. Confronted by the injustice of his new friend's treatment, he is both shocked and outraged. Something dawns on him, something that will not go away. This is perhaps McCarthy's most important insight.

Walter's confrontation with the security guards in the detention center, in what for him is an eruption of emotion, is well done. At first he says nothing, but angrily, stiffly stalks around the empty waiting room. Then, more or less, "You can't do that! ... We are not helpless children!"

The Visitor, which perhaps refers less to Tarek than to Walter, who is a 'visitor' both in the new, globalized New York and in his own life, is a generous, humane response to the US government's war on the Middle East and on immigrants in America. At the same time, it also bears the imprint of McCarthy's limited social and artistic approach.

The writer-director desires to create something "authentic and realistic," but he is only partway there. The film simplifies matters somewhat. Any intelligent artist will reject the stupid and malicious stereotypes of Arabs as "terrorists" and attempt to present living, breathing human beings. But McCarthy's portrait of the immigrant subculture in New York is somewhat sanitized. Arab, African and Israeli vendors mingle happily on city streets; Tarek thrives in its jazz clubs.

Life is more difficult than this in New York, and nearly everywhere else. None of McCarthy's characters apparently harbors a nationalist, racialist or any other kind of resentment. Walter's relationships with Tarek and Mouna proceed rather too seamlessly. *The Visitor* as a whole suffers from a degree of wishful thinking. The drama is weakened as a result and becomes somewhat predictable at certain moments.

The problem with such a soothing liberal interpretation is that it underestimates the depth of the social crisis and the resulting tensions. To acknowledge tensions and problems, according to such an interpretation, would be to play into the hands of right-wing demagogues. On the contrary, to confront difficulties honestly, including various deeply disoriented reactions to events, means facing more forthrightly the radical implications of society's intractable crisis.

In interviews McCarthy responds a little defensively to the notion that his film is a "political" work. He may well feel, to a certain extent legitimately, that such a label would be 'box office poison.' Also, as we have noted more than once, contemporary filmmakers prefer to confine themselves to miniatures and avoid consciously generalized pictures of social life. So, *The Visitor* is "a relationship story, a human story about these people," in Jenkins' words. McCarthy argues that the "detention-immigration storyline is really a B storyline—it's a C storyline [i.e., of secondary or tertiary importance]."

But the director himself points out that any serious film about New York, or anywhere else for that matter, must include "some sort of political or social idea." The division between "human" and sociopolitical is artificial, the product of a cultural and intellectual regression. Wide layers of artists too once understood that the human essence was the totality of the social relations. Penetrating into the 'human' in art, in fact, involves getting at the truth of these relationships. Spontaneity, honesty and social analysis ought to accompany and act upon, even drive, one another. This is not generally understood or accepted by contemporary filmmakers.