Hesher: The problem of the foreground and the background

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Directed by Spencer Susser, written by Susser and David Michôd

Hesher is an American independent film, the first feature directed by Spencer Susser. It is the story of a grief-stricken family, a 12-year-old boy, his father and grandmother, and the troubled and troubling young man, Hesher (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), who imposes himself on them.

The boy, T.J. (Devin Brochu), has lost his mother—and the father, Paul Forney (Rainn Wilson), his wife—in an automobile accident two months before. They have gone to live with Paul's mother, Madeleine (Piper Laurie). Neither has begun to get over the loss. Paul, unemployed, sits in a pill-induced stupor most of the day. T.J. is trying to recover the damaged car in which his mother died, and that effort entangles him inadvertently and unhappily with a school bully.

When, in his anger, T.J. smashes the window of a partially constructed house, he calls attention to Hesher, who is squatting in the structure. Having been made homeless, Hesher follows T.J. home to his grandmother's house and moves in there. According to the film's somewhat implausible logic, Paul is so numbed that he has no objection to the long-haired, heavily tattooed youth settling in. When he asks, "T.J., who is this?," the stranger replies simply, "The name's Hesher. I'm a friend of your son's," and that's it.

Hesher is given to obscenity, heavy metal rock and burning things up. But he is not stupid and he has some sense of the family's painful dynamics, including the grandmother's sadness. She has invited her son and grandson to stay with her, but they are so distracted and absent, that she is lonelier than ever.

A subplot, which seems rather incidental, involves T.J.'s crush on a grocery store cashier, Nicole (Natalie Portman), who has troubles of her own. Rescued by Hesher from the possible consequences of a minor car accident, she and T.J. are witnesses to his anti-social destructiveness when he throws everything into the pool at a stranger's house and sets the diving board on fire.

In the end, to a certain extent with Hesher's help, father and son begin to pull themselves together and get on with their lives.

Gordon-Levitt (the grandson of blacklisted Hollywood screenwriter Michael Gordon) is a genuinely appealing and talented actor, with the ability to get under the skin of a wide range of human types. This is fortunate, because without his personality behind the character, Hesher would mostly be unpleasant to watch operate. (Hollywood veteran Piper Laurie, with a distinguished career behind her, Natalie Portman and Devin Brochu are also fine.)

Given to profanity-filled metaphors, a little too worldly wise to be convincing, and quasi-sociopathic responses to what goes on around him, Hesher is not a coherent or plausible figure. Rather, he serves a purpose in the plot devised by Susser and David Michôd, who bend and twist him as the needs of the drama demand.

Susser, in an interview, explains that Hesher is "a complicated character, but he kind of represents death in a lot of ways … [O]nce they learn how to function

with him there, he kind of steps out of the way. He also represents life in a lot of ways, he points out some very simple things that we take for granted everyday." (*The Playlist*) That seems asking a great deal of any single character, that he simultaneously represent both Life *and* Death.

In other words, Hesher exists primarily to drive home, in a suitably gritty and "hardcore" fashion, certain truths the filmmakers would like to communicate … about appreciating what and who one has, struggling against seemingly impossible odds, getting on with one's life in spite of tragedy, and so on.

If this were all there was to *Hesher*, it might be fairly easily dismissed. However, the filmmakers have included, accidentally or not, glimpses of contemporary America that ring true. A commentator aptly notes about the film's setting (suburban southern California), "This is Any Place, USA. It is a beige world of junkyards, dirty swimming pools and sad checkout lanes. … This is a place with dollar groceries you imagine people shopping in after dark, ambling along with their carts to the hum of frozen food cases and one-hit wonders. You can see dreams slowly collapsing here, like the demolition of a building."

The difficulty is that today's American filmmaker generally places the important things in the background and the secondary ones in the foreground. As a consequence, the truthfulness of the work is lessened and its dramatic impact weakened.

In the case of *Hesher*: Losing somebody one loves and needs very much is terribly hurtful, and the hole in one's life difficult—perhaps impossible—to fill, but it is part of the nature of things. Life is finite, even the most long-lasting relationships come to an end. One aspect of maturity is coming to terms with that irresolvable contradiction.

It is not clear that advising people on how to deal with grief over individual tragedy, one of the most popular themes in American independent films at the moment, including *Hesher*, is very helpful. Most people learn from their own experience that time heals many wounds and those it cannot heal have to be lived with.

Susser and Michôd, in other words, are largely stating the obvious. What is far less evident to the overwhelming majority of Americans is why those aspects of their lives that *are* potentially subject to alteration and conscious control, involving the way society is organized and run, are deteriorating so rapidly and threaten such misery.

In *Hesher*, the Forney family is collectively depressed. This mental state, according to the logic of the storyline, stems from the death of the mother and wife. But the pictures, in a peculiar manner, suggest something different. The woman's death is not terribly real to us, we hardly meet her. The film's images evoke a depressive *social situation*, of fading prospects and low-paid jobs, of demoralized and sometimes brutalized individuals leading cramped existences. To that extent, *Hesher* is honest, and doesn't shy away from things.

In the single explicit reference to economic circumstances, Nicole, Portman's character, complains to T.J. at one point that she can only get 15 hours of work a week at the supermarket, when she needs more to live on.

But these and other concrete conditions, which are actually the decisive ones in shaping mental life, are treated only in passing. In effect, and this is the most harmful aspect, while Susser and Michôd are roused and disturbed by the relatively static elements in life, they—like the overwhelming majority of writers and directors currently at work—largely take for granted what should generate anger and protest.

Nonetheless, to the extent that the filmmakers are not interested in concealing anything, they may yet find their way to the most pressing problems and the artistic means to represent them.