

San Francisco International Film Festival 2012—Part 4

Twixt and Trishna: Weak films from Coppola and Winterbottom

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This is the final part of a series of articles on the 2012 San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 19-May 3. Part 1 was posted May 17, Part 2 on May 19 and Part 3 on May 22.

Twixt

Francis Ford Coppola has made considerable contributions to cinema (*The Godfather* [1972], *The Conversation* [1974], *Apocalypse Now* [1979] and others), so perhaps he can be forgiven for his latest film, *Twixt*, which was released in France during the San Francisco film festival and in the UK shortly afterward. How a given artist is worn down or worn out by the weight of socio-historical and personal issues, or simply runs out of things to say, is always a matter that demands a concrete study.

Twixt is essentially a campy horror movie shot through with a number of Coppola's favorite themes or motifs: Christian-Catholic imagery (*The Godfather*), vampires (*Dracula* [1992]), the interjection of odd bits of animation and unusual color schemes (*Rumble Fish* [1983]) and so on. Coppola has said the film and particularly the main character, a pre-teen girl named V (Elle Fanning), came to him first in a nightmare.

Apparently, the veteran filmmaker simply decided to have a bit of fun experimenting with new developments in film technology, working with some remarkable talent and trying on the directorial styles of others...John Waters and David Lynch come immediately to mind. The result is a goofy, overproduced mess.

The story takes place in a backwoods town with a murky past. Exhausted genre writer Hall Baltimore (Val Kilmer) arrives—his Volvo bearing a case of whiskey—to promote his new book at the prodding of his pushy agent and hateful wife. It becomes

clear Hall also harbors a lingering pain related somehow to his daughter.

The movie is relatively straightforward until Hall meets V (Fanning) when he wanders from his hotel room into an alternate, dream-like reality. From here, dream and reality mix, leading Hall into a business relationship with wild-eyed local sheriff turned writer Bobby LaGrange (Bruce Dern); a meeting with Flamingo (Alden Ehrenreich), leader of a group of leather-clad teen vampires who live like hippies next to a river; a conversation about writing with Edgar Allen Poe's ghost (Ben Chaplin); and a glimpse of an infanticidal priest, Pastor Allan Floyd (Anthony Fusco).

This sounds much more entertaining than it is. *Twixt* doesn't know if it's a shockladen horror film, a screwball comedy or a drama-tragedy about a man coping with the loss of a beloved daughter. Although presented at the festival as "tongue in cheek" (viewers were even reminded by a festival representative beforehand that it was meant to be laughed at), much of the content was not amusing at all and seemed instead as though it were intended to be taken seriously.

Dern—who reprises his "kooky neighbor" role from another poor film, *The 'Burbs* (1989)—and Kilmer—interesting as ever and surprisingly funny—do their very best with the material they are handed. They produce a few genuinely comic moments, but the actors can only do so much.

Nothing seems certain about this film, but at times one gets the distinct impression of being messed with. It's as though Coppola is entertaining himself by encouraging the audience to give a damn about Kilmer's character, to sympathize with him and to wince as the children's throats are slit one by one—but if one gives in, if one cares about any of it, *Twixt* flies off again into absurdity and ridicules any attempt to engage with it.

In this sense, it is a genuine emotional and artistic regression for Coppola. The whole film seems to reflect a sort of distilled adolescence reemerging from the aging director in the face of a vast and complex social breakdown that he'd rather ignore through tinkering away in his workshop.

It is unfortunate because the filmmaker has dealt well with many difficult aspects of life through his art in the past. This is

why every showing of *Twixt* at the festival was packed. People are desperately seeking knowledge and even guidance from artists like Coppola today; they're searching for something really beautiful, something interesting, something moving. *Twixt* is definitely not it. Even for a horror film, *Twixt*, frankly, is subpar—not even as good as his take on *Dracula*.

One can only hope that Coppola still has another significant work, or more, in him.

Trishna

Trishna (2011), directed by British-born Michael Winterbottom, was another festival film that drew many viewers. Although the WSWS has already briefly commented on the film, its apparent popularity at this year's festival merits a few further comments.

Trishna's story is loosely based on Thomas Hardy's classic novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. This is the third adaptation of Hardy's work by Winterbottom (following *Jude* [1998] and *The Claim* [2000]—based on *The Mayor of Casterbridge*). Shot in Jaipur and Mumbai, *Trishna* wins one over very quickly by showing India's natural beauty, while also taking us behind the façade of the tourist playgrounds.

Through the title character (played by Freida Pinto), a young working class girl, we see the daily struggle for survival of millions and millions in India. The depiction of daily life for Indian workers, in resorts, factories and farms, is one of the better aspects of the film. It is exhilarating to see this hardscrabble world—pregnant with possibilities, yet often invisible in film today. But this all disappears into the background as Winterbottom steers us back into the rather tired story of a couple from opposite sides of the tracks.

The stunningly beautiful Trishna works with tourists so as to help her parents provide for her school-age brothers and sisters. Through her job, she meets her love interest in the film, Jay Singh (Riz Ahmed), a wealthy young British businessman of Indian descent, who is rambling around the country with a group of friends. He is the son of a wealthy hotelier and eventually takes a cushy job running one of his father's resorts. He is enamored with Trishna, who initially does not take him seriously, but the force of events and Jay's subtle manipulations bring them together.

The ensuing relationship is naturally fraught with difficulties and misunderstandings. Although Jay is charming and always ready with money, the weakest sides of his personality and, ultimately, social upbringing, eventually reveal themselves. He is flighty, self-absorbed, irresponsible and spends his seemingly endless free time toying with women like Trishna.

Although Jay's playboy ways are obnoxious and at times infuriating, there is nothing especially surprising or new here: a rich guy picks up a naïve and beautiful, poor farm girl. He woos her, plays on her poverty, builds a dependence and then uses her until she can take no more. Relations based on class exploitation and domination bleed over into this personal relationship.

Yet, toward the end, the film becomes warped almost beyond recognition. The characters we knew mutate into two near-monsters at breakneck and unconvincing pace. First, Jay becomes a drug-addled sex addict who despises Trishna all of a sudden on flimsy grounds. This process reaches a crescendo in a gratuitous sex scene aptly set to the ghoulish, droning sample-filled music of *Portishead*.

Although Trishna is depicted as bright and careful throughout the movie and has been given a number of signs that Jay is not a dependable person—halfway through the movie he abandons her in Mumbai—she reacts to his indifference by seemingly losing her mind and taking violent, tragic action. This and her further crazed behavior are unbelievable and out of line with her character as Winterbottom has developed it.

So, why has the filmmaker turned two hitherto believable human characters into a couple of puppets so they can act out an improbable ending? We get a clue before the film ends. We see Trishna watching uniformed school children recite the Lord's Prayer, with their hands extended palm-down in a Roman salute, just before she wanders into the desert in a desperate state.

Winterbottom, it seems, is attempting to compensate for a relatively rudderless film by grafting a violent conclusion on to it in the guise of social commentary. Apparently, patriarchy is ultimately to blame.

Trishna has been victimized and ordered around by oppressive males one time too many: her demanding father who scorns her for getting pregnant; the sleazy entertainment moguls of Mumbai who want to whore her out; the rapists who lurk in the shadows of the big city as she returns from a wedding party; and finally Jay, the heartless playboy, who seemed so civilized, is also a male oppressor. All this turns a strong, young Indian worker into a homicidal “female-empowerment” cartoon.

Winterbottom has made genuine efforts to deal with challenging topics in the past, including his *In this World* (2002), about Pakistani refugees, and a strong documentary on detainees at Guantanamo Bay (2006). The problems with *Trishna*, however, graphically illustrate some of his limitations.

Concluded



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