The Face of an Angel and *Danny Collins*: A notorious murder trial and an aging musician

Joanne Laurier
10 July 2015

The Face of an Angel, *directed by Michael Winterbottom, screenplay by Paul Viragh, based on the book by Barbie Latza Nadeau*; Danny Collins, *directed and written by Dan Fogelman*

The Face of an Angel

Veteran British filmmaker Michael Winterbottom's *The Face of an Angel* is a fictionalized account of the events surrounding the Amanda Knox trial in Perugia, Italy. Knox, a young American student, and her Italian boyfriend were accused and convicted, and then eventually re-tried and acquitted of the 2007 murder of Knox's British roommate Meredith Kercher.

The case was the occasion for a relentless media circus. Winterbottom's film, inspired by American journalist Barbie Latza Nadeau's *Angel Face: Sex, Murder and the Inside Story of Amanda Knox*, is primarily a musing about the role and morality of the media.

The film imagines a trial similar to Knox's, but held in Siena. The accused is Jessica Fuller (Genevieve Gaunt), charged with killing Elizabeth Price (Sai Bennett).

A director, Thomas Lang, played by German actor Daniel Brühl (a stand-in for Winterbottom), is trying to jumpstart a floundering career by making a movie that would apparently avoid any investigation into the actual facts of the murder. He begins by making contact with Simone Ford (Kate Beckinsale), a journalist (and stand-in for Nadeau) who has written a book about the case. Her opinion, and one of the movie's taglines, is "you can't tell the truth unless you make it [the film] a fiction."

This is a fashionable but essentially empty phrase. In actual fact, a documentary, non-fiction film can tell the truth, and many fiction works fail to. Unfortunately, this is symptomatic of the vagueness and intellectual laziness at work here.

Lang is at loose ends, trying to make his film with the aid of drugs and a copy of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Why Dante's work? Presumably Winterbottom and screenwriter Paul Viragh couldn't avoid the reference, simply based on the Italian locale. No other convincing reason suggests itself.

Rather foolishly, Dante's narrative is made use of to represent different stages of Lang's ascent from the Hell of his personal demons through the Purgatory of bantering about the nature of what is real with other media figures (there is "no such thing as real truth and justice") to the Paradise in which he is guided by a young ethereal barmaid and student, Melanie (Cara Delevingne), who wants him to drop the topic of murder in favor of making a love story.

The plot is thin. Winterbottom attempts to help it along with a few close-ups of an angel-like girl romping about. Various subplots turn out to be red herrings. As part of the generally gloomy goings-on, the director transforms the magnificent Tuscan city of Siena into a dank, dark pit of sin and intrigue. Interspersed throughout the movie are fairly unhelpful snippets of the trial.

Winterbottom wants to make various points against tabloid journalism in particular, and that is of course legitimate. Lang tells a group of such types that they are only interested in "sex and murder … You write what sells." But this is hardly earthshaking news in 2015.

At the same time, however, the writer and director feel impelled to indict the population for its supposed obsession with scandal and murder, as though people had any choice in the media barrage unleashed against them. Author Nadeau says, speaking of Winterbottom, "He wanted to use the story as a vehicle to examine society's widespread fascination with death." According to whom?

Inevitably, *The Face of an Angel* pulls its punches in regard to the media too, since, after all, they are only providing the population what it wants. In an interview about the film, Beckinsale states that it "was weird for me to be playing the journalist but I realised quickly how important it was for my character that people were giving her information. It isn't just salacious, it isn't just what she [the accused] wore in court. And if we don't have journalists we live in a police state."

The fact of the matter is that the mainstream, corporate-controlled media has been an active participant in the drive toward a police state. Winterbottom's film is oblivious to the way in which such episodes as the Kercher-Knox case serve a vital purpose for the ruling elites: to assist in diverting attention from irreconcilable social and political tensions at home and abroad.

© World Socialist Web Site

Winterbottom has had a varied and, frankly, eclectic career. In a review of the filmmaker's *Tristram Shandy* (2006), the WSWS commented: "The prolific British director Michael Winterbottom has recently produced works in a number of distinct genres. *This World* and *Road to Guantánamo* are legitimate political commentaries treating the conditions of some of the most oppressed, *9 Songs* a tedious and pointless film that cuts between explicit sex scenes and rock music concerts. Winterbottom has previously directed two sincere but inadequate adaptations of novels by Thomas Hardy, a shallow film on the Balkans that favored stronger Great Power intervention (*Welcome to Sarajevo*) and an assortment of others. He appears to possess a certain 'film sense,' a flair for comedy and a social conscience, but none of these in sufficient quantities to overcome an essential eclecticism and superficiality."

Winterbottom also went on to direct *A Mighty Heart* (2007), about the killing of journalist Daniel Pearl; *The Shock Doctrine* (2009), a documentary based on the writings of liberal-left journalist Naomi Klein; and *The Emperor's New Clothes* (2015), also a documentary, featuring Russell Brand and focused on social inequality, which became part of the Labour Party election campaign earlier this year.

The filmmaker obviously has social concerns. However, his essentially noncommittal and falsely "even-handed" approach hinders him in going more deeply into the current state of things. We always remain on or near the impressionistic, journalistic surface.

With pretensions of being, in the words of one character, something of a "medieval, morality play," *The Face of an Angel* is essentially a confused and self-indulgent film.

Danny Collins

American writer, producer Dan Fogelman makes his directorial film debut with *Danny Collins*, based on a real-life incident in which John Lennon and Yoko Ono wrote a letter to English folk singer Steve Tilston in 1971, something he was unaware of for 34 years.

The movie's production notes explain that Tilston gave an interview to a music magazine in 1971 after the release of his successful first album. Tilston says he was asked, "'if I received wealth and fame beyond the dreams of avarice, would it affect my songwriting? And being a kind of pretentious, precocious songwriter, I said, well, yes it would. It would have a very detrimental effect. The article ran and I thought no more about it.' In the ensuing four decades, Tilston went on to become a celebrated songwriter and musician, and a fixture on the contemporary folk-music scene. 'He supported himself with his music for more than four decades,' says Fogelman. 'He never 'sold out.' He stayed true to himself.'"

In 2005, "Tilston received an astonishing communication from a memorabilia collector in America who had purchased a letter addressed to Steve Tilston and wanted to authenticate it." It was from John Lennon who wanted to tell the fledgling artist that being "rich doesn't change your experience in the way you think."

The Lennon letter became the launching pad for Fogelman's movie. Al Pacino plays Danny Collins, an aging rock star, whose biggest and most beloved hit is a Neil Diamond-esque tune entitled "Hey Baby Doll," a song he has performed for 40 years. He is wealthy, engaged to a woman less than half his age … and miserable.

When his manager Frank (Christopher Plummer) obtains a letter from John Lennon addressed to Danny decades ago, the latter decides to change his life. ("You [Lennon] should have sent the letter to my house, and maybe I would not have had such a bulls—t life.") The change involves fleeing to New Jersey, booking into the Woodcliff Lake Hilton, and seeking out his 40-year-old, working class son Tom (Bobby Cannavale), who has a supportive wife (Jennifer Garner) and an adorable, hyperactive little girl (Katarina ?as), with ADHD.

Tom wants nothing to do with a father who has been absent all of his life. But Danny is irrepressible and gets an additional reality-check from the Hilton's remarkably grounded manager Mary (Annette Bening)—"While you're checking me in, I'll be checking you out." Trying to win Tom over, Danny keeps making passes at the "age-appropriate" Mary, who keeps putting him off and "moving the goal post." Nonetheless, she encourages the singer to write new material.

A few comic and not-so-comic scenes later, the wrongs are righted and Danny has found a "kind of redemption."

With the entertaining combination of Pacino, Plummer and Bening, Fogelman's movie is generally an amusing trifle. Despite some overbearing moments from Pacino, his Danny is imbued with a been-there-done-that charm and the genuine fatigue of a life-long performer.

Unfortunately, putting the communication from John Lennon at the center of this particular story is misleading. In fact, the film trivializes the iconic artist who, in 1971, was involved in anti-Vietnam War protests, along with other political causes. At that time Lennon wrote a letter about artistic integrity to a serious musician. It is unlikely that the likes of a Danny Collins would have been on his radar screen. The protagonist in *Danny Collins* is worlds apart from the object of Lennon's attention, giving the movie—and John Lennon—a somewhat cartoonish bearing.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site