

Manglehorn and *The Cobbler*: The influence of social-gravitational forces

David Walsh
13 July 2015

Manglehorn, directed by David Gordon Green, written by Paul Logan; *The Cobbler*, directed by Tom McCarthy, written by McCarthy and Paul Sado ...

Of course, not everyone is making a “blockbuster” action film.

These two films, *Manglehorn*, directed by David Gordon Green, and *The Cobbler*, directed by Tom McCarthy, both fall into the independent drama, or comedy-drama category.

Each attempts to deal with a frustrated, lonely individual in a contemporary American setting. The central character in both movies is a tradesman: a locksmith in one case and a cobbler in the other. Presumably, this is not entirely accidental, but indicates a desire to portray something or someone other than superheroes and supermodels. (To an interviewer’s question, “Why a locksmith?” Green responded half-jokingly that “my buddy Tom McCarthy was already making a movie called *The Cobbler*, so I couldn’t do that. I wanted it to be an old-school trade. Some sort of lonely technician, but in another world.”)

Each of the two works treats the dominant feature of the current situation, vast and growing social inequality, in the form of a passing reference to the noxiousness of the rich. Each has valuable and entertaining moments, but neither as a whole is especially satisfactory. Avoiding a big budget, or not having access to one, and its attendant bombast does not by itself solve the most pressing present problems in filmmaking.

Green’s *Manglehorn* is the more successful of the two works. Set in Central Texas, the title character played by Al Pacino owns a locksmith business.

A.J. Manglehorn has isolated himself, in part it would seem as the result of losing the “love of his life,” which was not his former wife, decades ago. His son (Chris Messina), from whom he is estranged, is a fast-talking, affluent commodity trader. Gary (Harmony Korine, the maker of dreadful films), who once played on a Little League baseball team that Manglehorn coached and now operates some sort of sleazy tanning-massage parlor, merely irritates the older man. Manglehorn manages to push away an attractive bank teller, Dawn (Holly Hunter), who obviously likes him. He is closest to his cat.

The film has an appealing, intriguing, realistic *look*. Green is attuned enough to the generally declining fortunes or difficult circumstances of wide layers of the population to be able at times to let some of that emerge in his imagery. The most persuasive scenes tend to be the ones the director emphasizes the least: Manglehorn at work, helping a distraught Spanish-speaking mother who has locked her child in a car, performing other daily functions.

Unhappily, Green—like many before him in the independent film world—seems convinced that turning on a camera in textured

surroundings and in the vicinity of talented performers will somehow produce a cohesive, meaningful work. Of course, by itself, this operation never has and never will.

Pacino, always engaging when he is restrained, and he is generally restrained here, nonetheless fails to convince fully as a modest Texan locksmith. In one scene, for example, a pancake breakfast at an American Legion hall, in which he sits with a group of older men and tells a story about a past tragedy, one that apparently helped convince him that God did not exist and deepened his bitterness, Pacino-Manglehorn sticks out like a sore thumb. He is so clearly a figure from the entertainment business addressing a group of non-professional, working class men.

The filmmaker and his screenwriter want to have their cake and eat it too. In a given sequence, because Green thinks he has a fruitful opportunity, his central character is allowed to be gregarious and outgoing, almost too talkative; in the next, when he remembers what the essential characterization is intended to be, Manglehorn acts like or is described as a taciturn misanthrope. It doesn’t add up at the end of the day.

The problem does not lie with Pacino as such, but with an “open-ended” script that does not have sufficient pointedness or purpose to it. Under those circumstances, according to Green, the actors were given leeway to improvise. One doesn’t want to be unkind, but nine times out of ten at present when a director gives his or her actors their “head,” it is not the result of working in a free, creative manner toward a commonly agreed upon and important goal, but rather of intellectual vagueness and indecision. To a certain extent, this is a failure to accept one’s central responsibility as an artist to make sense of things.

The latter is not primarily a formal question. The pressure of various influences, including the social indifference that prevails in upper middle class circles, makes itself felt here.

There are too many forced and unconvincing moments in *Manglehorn*. The lead character, for instance, invites Dawn on a dinner date and proceeds to antagonize her, almost deliberately, by describing the qualities of his great past love. The disappointed woman ultimately flees the restaurant in tears. Manglehorn would have to be a far less sane individual than he is otherwise portrayed, far more lacking in *any* social skill or sensibility, to do such a thing.

Even when Pacino’s character tells his son, who is in some sort of trouble with investigators, that he is nothing but “a shark and a liar,” one doesn’t feel the depth of what should be the tragedy of the situation, despite Messina’s useful efforts, because the moment has not been properly prepared by the rest of the film. One suspects, whether it is true or not, that this is a line that simply came into the

actor's head and seemed shocking and arresting at the instant.

Green first came into view with *George Washington* in 2000, when he was about 25. I spoke to him at the Toronto film festival that year. To be frank, that film was not all that satisfying as a dramatic whole either, but it seemed worth paying attention to if for no other reason than its concern with “ordinary” people, working class youth, both black and white, in particular.

Green explained in the conversation his experience up to that time with the mainstream film industry: “I went to Los Angeles for a year, basically figuring the industry out a little bit, working for production companies and studios, on productions, on sets, just doing every job I could. I was very frustrated. I don’t like the way it works out there. Everything is contingent on cast and packaging. Everything seems so artificial, and not soulful and not passionate. People would go into multi-million dollar productions that they knew in the end were going to be terrible movies, but had already pre-sold for financial gain in foreign territories, so they were just laughing their way through it all. It was disheartening for me.”

He continued in the same somewhat meandering, self-consciously poetic, slightly off-kilter vein in *All the Real Girls* (2003) and, more weakly, *Undertow* (2004). In a recent interview he commented, “I don’t know why I was making these lyrical southern dramas,” a rather unpleasant comment, which seems like a near apology for his earliest films. One wants to respond: “Perhaps because you were more sincere at the time.”

In regard to *All the Real Girls*, I wrote: “The biggest difficulty is that the filmmaker holds emotions and social life apart. He wants to use the social setting merely as a skeleton onto which he hangs his truths. But people are not simply vessels for the working out of eternal human dilemmas, they do this working out under definite historical circumstances, as members of specific classes, all of which impart to these ‘eternal dilemmas’ a quite distinct coloring and character, qualitatively so. The inner lives of Green’s characters are inextricably tied to their ‘outer’ lives, as inhabitants of a decaying industrial town, with diminished prospects, at a particular juncture in history. But the director seems reluctant thus far to work this through.”

In any event, Green eventually had the misfortune or poor taste to link up with the Judd Apatow-Seth Rogen-Evan Goldberg-Jonah Hill crowd and turned out *Pineapple Express* (2008) and *The Sitter* (2011), as well as *Your Highness* (2011), with the generally unfunny and unenlightening Danny McBride. Rogen and Goldberg, of course, were responsible for the reprehensible and even sinister *The Interview* (2014), which promoted the assassination of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

In the more recent period, in *Prince Avalanche* (2013), *Joe* (also 2013) and now *Manglehorn*, Green has returned to his more personal, family dramas, without, however, showing signs of having progressed all that much. There continue to be individual, isolated moments of truth, separated by considerable swathes of blunted and amorphous material. In interviews Green comes across as a bit too pleased with himself and his “rise” in the film world. Honestly, he has not accomplished enough to justify, if it could ever be justified, this sort of self-satisfaction.

The Cobbler

Tom McCarthy has directed *The Station Agent* (2003), *The Cobbler* (2007) and *Win Win* (2011). The second film, with the remarkable Richard Jenkins, took a humane look at undocumented immigrants in New York City, while the last, with the equally remarkable Paul Giamatti and Amy Ryan, about a “struggling suburban lawyer and the athletic prodigy he stumbles on,” was “not earthshaking, but sincere and genuinely heartfelt.”

McCarthy, a well-known film performer himself, seems comfortable with and capable of directing actors. The *Station Agent* also included intelligent performances from Peter Dinklage and Patricia Clarkson.

Again, it is less clear that McCarthy has something crucial to contribute on the state of modern American life. He evidently wanted to change directions with *The Cobbler*, and move away from the “small, human drama” in the direction of something more ambitious and even “magic realist.” Unfortunately, due to a story and script that do not stay the coherent or insightful course, *The Cobbler* fails rather badly in the end.

Adam Sandler, best known for his own brand of unfunny and unenlightening comedy, plays Max Simkin, who repairs shoes in a small shop on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. The devastation of the neighborhood by real estate developers lies in the film’s background.

McCarthy’s film reminds one, at least in its initial stages, of a piece of Jewish folklore. Simkin has inherited from his grandfather a stitching machine with magical properties. When Simkin puts on a pair of shoes repaired by the machine he becomes the individual who owns the footwear.

Simkin, much to his amazement, is alternately transformed into an African American, a young Chinese man, an intellectual type, a cross-dresser, a hipster, etc. This ability, literally, to walk in someone else’s shoes is amusing at first and the potential for greater amusement seems to loom.

However, the influence of the present conditions in America, as reflected through a limited and rather predictable artistic prism, largely derails *The Cobbler*. Conventional and stereotyped characters rapidly appear en bloc, including a girlfriend-beating, criminal lowlife (Clifford “Method Man” Smith), a spirited community activist (Melonie Diaz) and a perfidious real estate mogul (Ellen Barkin). The film tends to fall apart in the midst of unexpectedly violent and nasty goings-on.

A farfetched and foolish—and unnecessary—epilogue, in which Dustin Hoffman as Max’s father plays a significant role, does not help matters.

Sandler is not the problem either. As he did in *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002), he proves himself a capable enough actor. The writer and director have simply not thought very profoundly about the situation in a city like New York. McCarthy’s concern with “one of the great scourges of modern society, the real estate developers,” is perfectly legitimate, but significant comedy or tragedy needs something more than this barebones and fairly obvious insight, clumsily dramatized.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact