

Louder than Bombs from Norwegian director Joachim Trier

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Norwegian director Joachim Trier's English-language debut *Louder than Bombs* is an intergenerational, upper-middle-class family drama that takes place in New York state.

Three years after the tragic death of renowned French war photographer, Isabelle Reed (Isabelle Huppert), her ex-husband, a retired actor and college teacher, Gene Reed (Gabriel Byrne), has difficulty dealing with his feelings. His grief is revived in advance of an exhibition set to open in his wife's memory, organized by Isabelle's former coworker and lover, Richard (David Strathairn).

Unable to sort the negatives and files she left behind, Gene invites his older son, Jonah (Jesse Eisenberg), to help him. He also hopes that Jonah, now a college professor and a father himself, can help him deal with his difficult, 15-year-old son, Conrad (Devin Druid), who remains unaware that his mother's death was a suicide.

In one of *Louder than Bombs*' first scenes, set in a maternity ward, Jonah kisses his wife and then wanders off into the arms of an ex-girlfriend he "accidentally" meets in the hospital. The viewer is already subjected to the film's dull tempo and its distasteful portrayal of bourgeois marriage, a "system of wives in common" (Marx).

But things get worse. As the camera's focus shifts from the cowardly, hunched over Jonah, past the hopelessly posturing Gene, to the mentally disturbed Conrad, the experience of watching the banal and neurotic problems of the privileged becomes almost unbearable.

There is almost nothing positive to report about the movie. Every important element, including the camera work, is uncreative and random, often ugly. Even Huppert, elsewhere a sensitive and superb actress, cannot save *Louder than Bombs*. Inserted as a ghostly presence in flashback, she is lost and surprisingly flat.

The characters are all more or less appalling individuals. The head of the family, Gene, is a spineless stalker of his

own son and, to add to the movie's heap of clichés, is involved in a secret affair with a much younger woman, Hannah (Amy Ryan), Conrad's English teacher. Jesse is a financially successful, opportunistic petty adulterer who has no courage to speak his mind or tell the truth. His nerdy brother, Conrad, spends all day in virtual reality, killing people. The classmate he is infatuated with is a sleazy cheerleader who thinks Conrad is "cool" for spitting in their teacher's face.

The scenes involving Conrad are quite disturbing in view of the fact that the deranged boy seems to become the director's favorite. The teenager's diary, treated as a very promising work of art, reveals a blog-like stream of nonsense, corny "revelations" and misanthropic vulgarities. Portraying a character who could potentially evolve into a killer like Anders Breivik is one thing—liking him is another.

Trier, born in Copenhagen in 1974, has at least something in common with his distant relative, Danish director Lars von Trier. The desire to glorify what's "extreme," violent and perverse as things in themselves, with its Nietzschean overtones, seems to unite these two self-indulgent, superficial and smug pseudo-artists. Out of a lack of genuine creativity, they resort to sensational, sado-masochistic tricks to shock and impress.

Louder than Bombs is nothing but a milder version of von Trier's dreadful *Nymphomaniac* (2013). An unpalatable mishmash of de Sade and Freud is forced down our throats here through a series of semi-pornographic scenes containing rape fantasies, physical abuse, suggested incest and more.

An idealized specter of a deceased mother and wife, Isabelle, hovers over the other lifeless characters in the movie. A renowned war photographer, inspired by a real-life French journalist, Alexandra Boulat, she "evidently specializes in those apoliticised, stereotypical images of women in veils in the Middle East and of nameless people

getting blown up” (Peter Bradshaw for the *Guardian*).

That is to say, Isabelle profits financially from the misery of others while contributing to the general project of covering up what lies behind the endless, predatory imperialist interventions in the Middle East. The content of the lives of those being photographed is of little or no importance—the spotlight is on the artistic beauty of the perfectly framed photograph of the dead and suffering.

Photo agencies and glossy magazines handsomely rewarded Isabelle for her services. Together with her family, she led a lavish lifestyle. Her continual complaints about how exhausting her job is and how hard it is to change airplanes while traveling back from various expeditions are unconvincing and simply insulting. Who cares?

Trier is unable to treat journalism or war seriously, or much of anything else. He is also clueless about the society he aspires to portray. “While we were writing the film, my cowriter, Eskil Vogt, said, ‘Damn, Joachim, most of the stuff we know about Americans, we learned from *The Simpsons*,’” Trier admitted in an interview with the *Paris Review*. Then why should anyone take him seriously?

But the *Paris Review* adores the clueless *auteur* anyway: “Readers of the *Review* know that the Norwegian filmmaker Joachim Trier [*Reprise*; *Oslo, August 31st*] is one of our favorite young directors,” they write. Trier’s kitsch film generally received high marks, critics terming *Louder than Bombs* “great,” “subtle,” “a serious melodrama.”

Louder than Bombs is not a serious portrait of American society. It is a product of Trier’s own unimportant, self-absorbed musings, which mirror the concerns of a privileged, socially indifferent layer.

All in all, watching Trier’s film is very unpleasant and painful.



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