

Cash Only: What interests contemporary filmmakers and what doesn't

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25 May 2016

Directed by Malik Bader; written by Nickola Shreli

Cash Only is an independent American film set in the Detroit area. The city's environs are home to thousands of Albanians. The film takes place in that community.

Elvis Martini (played by the screenwriter and film's initiator, Nickola Shreli) is the landlord of a small apartment building. Most of his tenants—including a friend of his (with whose wife or fiancée he is having an affair), a stripper-prostitute and a marijuana grower (whose operations take up most of the basement)—are behind in their rent. The bank is about to foreclose on the property. He also owes \$10,000 to a neighborhood hood.

Elvis is generally in a bad state, having lost his wife two years before. He has a beloved daughter, Lena, but can't afford to send her to parochial school any more.

When a large sum of money more or less falls into his lap, he begins to pay off his various debts. Unhappily, the cash turns out to have been stolen and its "rightful owner" strongly desires it back. The latter abducts Elvis's young daughter and gives him until midnight the same day to come up with \$25,000.

Elvis attempts by various means, fair and foul, to raise the money. When he shows up at the appointed hour with the cash, or a portion of it, things only get worse. He falls into the hands of a psychopath intent on revenge.

There are initially appealing elements to *Cash Only*. It takes place in a recognizable setting: beat-up, declining America. The chilly, dirty streets, the ugly housing, the "convenience stores" that sell mostly junk, the factories and warehouses that are mostly closed, the uninviting bars and social clubs, the harshness of the relations between people—these are features of everyday life for millions, not just Albanian Americans.

The dialogue too, partly in English, partly in

Albanian, rings true for much of the film. Shreli and the other performers are effective.

In a statement, Shreli explains that "I wanted to write a small gutsy street tale about a place and fabric I knew very well." He describes Elvis as "a conflicted stray," who "unfortunately barked up the wrong tree trying to right some wrongs."

Shreli goes on, "That's what we were trying to capture, regardless of time or budget constraints. We wanted to give the audience a chance to ride shotgun and hang with this guy in the uneasy trenches of underground Balkan Detroit with a really visceral vibe."

Budget constraints are not an issue, as far as the viewer is concerned. The film is professionally and efficiently—even elegantly—shot, directed and acted. The difficulties lie elsewhere.

It is *something* to show portions of the recognizably real world in a drama, and perhaps more today than ever, but it is not *everything*. Given the demands and responsibilities of art, in the end, it is not even all that much. *Cash Only* operates according to something of a formula. It relies on our curiosity about these streets and these people, not seen on the screen very often, and brings us into their orbit, but then does very little with them. Shreli and director Malik Bader have followed the "edgy," "independent" cinema recipe for creating an enticing surface, but no more than that.

The final, bloody denouement reveals the filmmakers' severe limitations. This is simply lazy—and evasive. An encounter with a sadistic lunatic "solves" the dramatic and real-life problems posed by the film's own logic at the expense, however, of social and psychological truth. Nothing has been solved in any real sense, merely postponed, pushed outside the framework of the film. We still have to consider for

ourselves—without the aid of *Cash Only*, as it turns out—what a human being would actually do if he found himself in the central character’s economic and social bind.

We have not advanced terribly far from films like Nick Gomez’s *Laws of Gravity* (1992), set in the “gritty” streets of Greenpoint, Brooklyn, or for that matter, Martin Scorsese’s *Mean Streets* (1973), set in the “gritty” streets of Manhattan’s Little Italy, each with its inevitably violent and predictable conclusion.

This reviewer would easily choose Rola Nashef’s semi-comic *Detroit Unleaded*, about Lebanese Americans in Detroit, which shows greater concern and affection for people, over *Cash Only*, which postures at being tough-minded and unsentimental, only to end up at the door, both metaphorically and physically, of the Albanian Catholic Church.

Life is richer than most art at the moment, which is not entirely the way it should be. In March 2014, for example, the news media reported the case of one Tomo Duhanaj, 44, of Troy, Michigan, an ethnic Albanian from Kosovo in the former Yugoslavia, who pleaded guilty to loan sharking activities within the Albanian community in Detroit.

According to CBS News, “Duhanaj loaned hundreds of thousands of dollars at high interest rates, sometimes exceeding 100 percent per year, to community members with the understanding that failure to repay the loans would result in violence.” CBS reported “that Federal prosecutors describe Duhanaj, an undocumented immigrant ... as a ‘tough guy’ in the Albanian community.” US Attorney Barbara L. McQuade explained, “This defendant used his contacts in his community to prey upon people who were desperate for cash.”

This is clearly the general territory in which *Cash Only* is operating. But there is another angle to the Duhanaj story, a more intriguing and sinister one.

In 2007 Duhanaj had appealed a decision denying him an application for asylum in the US, and apparently lost that appeal. How he managed to stay in the country and pursue his loan sharking and related money laundering for another half a decade is unclear.

In any case, in his 2007 appeal, Duhanaj claimed that in his younger days he had “devoted his time [to] working for a free Kosovo.” While he lived in Michigan in the 1990s, he explained that he “became

involved with pro-Kosovo political organizations and joined the local branch of the Lidhja Demokratike e Kosoves (‘LDK’), the Democratic Party of Kosovo, with which he had been affiliated in Kosovo. Duhanaj testified that he participated in fundraising and demonstrations for the cause of a free Kosovo. After the war broke out in Kosovo in 1998, he attended a meeting in Michigan sponsored by the LDK and the Kosovo Liberation Army (‘KLA’).”

The connection between reactionary communalist, Washington-sponsored “Kosovo liberation” and gangsterism is once again confirmed. As the WSWS noted in 2009, after the BBC presented evidence of torture and murders carried out by the KLA in a secret network of prisons in Kosovo and Albania, “The fact is the KLA played a key role in the United States’ strategy of breaking up the Yugoslav republic into its constituent parts, thus ensuring US hegemony within the Balkan region and threatening the broader geo-strategic interests of Russia.”

In his 2007 court appeal, Duhanaj the loan shark “submitted photos of himself with prominent Kosovar Albanian, American, and UN officials and politicians, including President [Bill] Clinton”! Unfortunately, this fascinating little Detroit-area story, with all its social and geopolitical implications, would not be of much interest to our contemporary filmmakers.



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