

Sofia Coppola's *The Beguiled*: Historical drama with hardly any history

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Written and directed by Sofia Coppola, based on the novel by Thomas P. Cullinan

Sofia Coppola's new movie, *The Beguiled*, is based on the 1966 novel of the same title by Thomas P. Cullinan, as was a 1971 work directed by Don Siegel and featuring Clint Eastwood.

Set during the American Civil War, Coppola's version is a historical drama from which virtually all significant historical material has been excised. It shrinks the story to an abstract, psycho-sexual fantasy that is essentially unconvincing and insubstantial. Along the way, the new film demonstrates once again how contemporary gender and racial politics tyrannizes over much of current cultural life.

The action in *The Beguiled* is restricted to the grounds of a girls school in Virginia in 1864. The Farnsworth Seminary, located in an old plantation house, is run by Martha Farnsworth (Nicole Kidman). Its student population has been reduced to five by the war. While in the woods searching for mushrooms, one of the youngest students, Amy (Oona Laurence), discovers a Union soldier, Corporal John McBurney (Colin Farrell), suffering from a serious leg wound. "The slaves left," she tells him.

Spinster headmistress Martha decides to nurse the "enemy" soldier until he recovers. The plan is then to turn him over to the Confederate army. Instead, McBurney's presence generates tensions that have an impact on every member of the household. Particularly affected is teacher and second-in-command, Edwina Morrow (Kirsten Dunst), who comes from a wealthy background. "Any breath of air from the outside world should be welcome," is her initial reaction. Meanwhile the bored, sultry, teenage Alicia (Elle Fanning) is bent on seducing the male intruder. Instinctive fear of a Union soldier is apparently supplanted by a war for

John's affections that leads to a disturbing denouement.

Coppola's *The Beguiled* is a tedious and limp work. Its characters, for the most part, are selfish and unappealing. The Union soldier is essentially a quasi-mercenary, who deserted the battlefield--a Northern combatant with no feeling for the anti-slavery cause.

The sexual desperation of the women, around which the film revolves, is not especially credible. After all, they are not marooned on a desert island. On the contrary, they are (presumably) surrounded by male soldiers preoccupied with survival. And why are they themselves not more worried about the threat of death? Why are they not consumed by the need for food and firewood? Where do their abundant meals come from, on a plantation bereft of livestock or edible vegetation? And despite the acute hardships of war--the bloody Civil War no less--these women, adolescent and older, are entirely focused on their libidos!

Coppola's lack of historical specificity is telling. Why place this story during the Civil War? This tableau of besieged women could be set in any war in history so lacking is it in historical particularity. Furthermore, the director has made a point of transmuting the war from a battle against slavery to a battle of the genders. In interviews, Coppola commented that she wanted to skirt the issue of racial politics, as though, in the first place, the Civil War was a conflict about skin color.

Unhappily, Coppola has succeeded in making a weaker film than Siegel's *The Beguiled*, which itself is rather weak and confused. Of particular note is her elimination of the only element that gave the 1971 version, filmed in the aftermath of the major inner-city rebellions, some focus and weight--that is, the character of the slave. Mae Mercer's dignified Hallie is the only person not overrun by sexual repression and incest. Without her, Siegel's movie would have been even

more of a piece of psycho-sexuality gone wild.

In a review of the 1971 film in the *Village Voice*, critic Andrew Sarris wrote: “Siegel has endowed his characters with more density than depth and his plot with more perverse twists than profound turns. Perhaps the tortuousness of his subject has simply overloaded his style. Or perhaps, even more sadly, Siegel has finally made the kind of epic he always wanted to make.”

The latter suggestion is probably closest to the truth. A competent maker of tough-minded, often cynical action films, along with the remarkable *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), Siegel showed the limitations of his conceptions when he ventured into the realm of ambitious historical epic. *The Beguiled* is one of his most irritating and least successful films.

For her part, at least Coppola is consistent. She peoples her films, whether set in France in the 18th century (*Marie Antoinette*, 2006), the American South in the 19th (*The Beguiled*), suburban Detroit in the 20th (*The Virgin Suicides*, 1999) or Japan in the 21st (*Lost in Translation*, 2003), with characters presumably based on the human beings in whose circles she travels--self-involved, socially indifferent, comfortably off--and imagines she has offered pronouncements on humanity as a whole.

Sadly too, Coppola has made the kind of movie the present cultural landscape dictates. As she commented about her decision to make the film, “there was a Don Siegel film in the early 70s starring Clint Eastwood and it's told from the male point of view and I thought it would be so interesting to retell this story from the women characters.” It's not entirely clear what that might mean, aside from “retelling this story” in such a way that presents the homicidal climax as somehow deserved and legitimate. Is this what Coppola had in mind? If so, it's not clear that in putting *The Beguiled* together the director has had the courage of her convictions.

Most telling, however, is Coppola's decision to omit the character of the slave, present both in the original novel and the 1971 film--and, most importantly, one might point out, in the American South in 1864!

The reasons why the director made this choice are obvious, but none of them do her any credit.

First, there is the simple matter of her apparent lack of interest, shared by the overwhelming majority of

contemporary filmmakers, in seriously exploring historical questions. At present writers and directors are satisfied for the most part to project themselves and their concerns back in time in the name of “universality” and supposedly unchanging human nature.

Further, the collection of women would have been far less sympathetic to audiences if they were shown to be slave-owners or at least to benefit from slave labor. Since Coppola's intention was to represent the females essentially as victims responding to McBurney's threatening or disturbing presence, they could not be tainted by an association with slavery. (In the new film, Kidman's Martha is a more honorable figure than her unstable counterpart, played by Geraldine Page, in the Siegel movie.).

Moreover, Coppola was evidently trying to avoid in advance charges that she, as a white filmmaker, was guilty of “culture appropriation” or at least “racial insensitivity,” for daring to portray black suffering--according to the reactionary logic of identity politics, the exclusive jurisdiction of African American filmmakers.

So, Coppola has cannily crafted a gender politics adaptation that avoids the “difficult” problems posed by making a film about the US Civil War. In the process, however, she managed to suck any compelling and important life out of her version of *The Beguiled*.



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