

Sean Penn's *The Last Face* and Hollywood's "August Death March"

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Directed by Sean Penn; written by Erin Dignam

The first film directed by Sean Penn since *Into the Wild* (2007), *The Last Face* follows the relationship between two aid workers in Africa. Wren Petersen (Charlize Theron) is a doctor and director of a medical humanitarian organization founded by her legendary late father. Miguel Leon (Javier Bardem) is a surgeon devoted to treating the suffering in various war zones.

The film contains reenactments of terrible, chaotic, even homicidal scenes from the Liberian civil war in 2003 and, more recently, South Sudan.

Somewhat ludicrously, Miguel and Wren come together in the midst of massacres in Liberia. Shortly after performing a gruesome, emergency C-section on a woman wounded in a machete attack, Miguel amorously approaches Wren. "Are you kidding me?," she says, in response to his advances. "Is nothing sacred to you?" He grandly replies, "Everything is sacred to me."

They carry on for a while, even after Wren discovers that her cousin was Miguel's previous lover and now is HIV positive. Eventually, the horror of the situation wears Wren down. She orders the mission out of Liberia, but Miguel remains. Ten years later, they briefly resume the relationship. The film jumps back and forth in time and between scenes of bloody civil war and the progress of the protagonists' love affair.

The Last Face met with a savage critical response at the Cannes film festival. There are awful elements to the work. A title at the beginning reads, incongruously and a little incomprehensibly, "Ten years apart, the Liberian civil war of 2003 and the ongoing conflict within South Sudan today, share a singular brutality of corrupted innocence. A corruption of innocence only known to the West, by any remotely common degree ... through the brutality of an impossible love ... shared by a man ... and a woman ..."

Is Penn actually comparing the "brutality" of civil war

in Africa to the "brutality" of personal relationships among Western professionals? If so, this would take middle class self-involvement, along with obliviousness to the harsh social situation in "the West," to disturbing new heights.

The biggest difficulty with *The Last Face* is the degree of ideological disorientation and geopolitical cluelessness on display, which is not Penn's alone of course. The actor-director no doubt sincerely wants to impress his audience with some of the ghastliness of the present situation in Africa. However, lacking any serious perspective, his heaping up of horrors comes close to inventing a new sub-genre of porno-sadism, a modern-day *Mondo Cane*.

Some of it is simply appalling: a helicopter pilot blithely informs Miguel, "You know that girl I was dancing with? She watched her sister get raped to death and she was raped as well," adding later, "She's beautiful." At another point, Miguel reveals that "wars and women are my heroin," while the couple later muses on whether or not "there would be an 'us' without war." Meanwhile, Wren informs her organization's board that "saving lives is a serious mission."

A healthy portion of the film's time is spent on shots of Miguel or Wren, wearily sighing over the state of the world, holding his or her head in his or her hands.

Penn is concerned with human suffering, but not enough to look seriously into its source, global capitalism. *The Last Face* contains one passing, forgettable reference to "colonialism," but it does not make the slightest attempt at a serious historical or social accounting. Penn, who now mingles with the Clintons and their ilk, finds it unfeasible, perhaps impractical, in any case beyond his reach, to indict imperialism and the venal national ruling elites for the misery inflicted on the African population.

The unbearable conditions on the African continent more than any other cry out for a revolutionary solution, the unification of the working class and oppressed in the

overthrow of the existing social order. Only the rational, international use of resources and technology under socialism, without the murderous interference of global capital and its drive for profit, will transform the situation.

In the year of the centenary of the Russian Revolution, Penn, from a Stalinist background (his father Leo Penn was blacklisted in the 1950s), pours cold, cynical water on such a perspective. He and screenwriter Erin Dignam have Miguel blurt out helpfully, “I’ve never seen the oppressed *not* become the oppressor.” To Wren’s comment that their aid efforts seem “futile,” Miguel replies, “There’s no solution,” except perhaps human “evolution,” presumably in a more humane direction and at some point in the distant future.

Penn accepts without criticism or comment “humanitarian imperialist” intervention in Africa by the various powers (as he has done, in practice, in Haiti and elsewhere). Miguel’s only comment is that even “the West can’t stop this.” One is drawn inexorably to the conclusion, simply by the graphic quality of the imagery, that the Africans are to blame in part for the hell-like conditions, or at least are incapable of ameliorating them. All that remains are the quasi-futile efforts of heroic individual martyrs.

The attitude of socialists is diametrically opposed to this. As we have noted in regard to US, French and great power activity in Africa generally, “Although humanitarian concerns and the threat of global terrorism are being used to justify these operations, they in reality comprise part of a new Scramble for Africa, as the US and Europe compete over the area’s natural resources and seek to minimize Chinese influence.”

Tellingly, *The Last Face* more or less begins and ends with Theron-Wren, dressed to the nines, speaking before a well-heeled audience and appealing for funds. After referring to war, poverty, disease and the wretched condition of the world’s refugees, she asserts that “with your help, they [refugees] will achieve their dreams.” Furthermore, she tells the assembled, the refugees “are us.” Her audience gives her a standing ovation. It’s pathetic.

Theron and Bardem remain talented, charming performers. The few convincing moments in *The Last Face* suggest the reality of a stormy, “celebrity” relationship, something they and Penn know a little bit about.

There is a great deal to criticize or even ridicule here, but the hostile reaction of the critics would be more convincing if it were not the case that this same group

obediently and approvingly falls into line, virtually to a man or woman, confronted with dreadful (and often actively pernicious) films by Quentin Tarantino, Kathryn Bigelow, Lars von Trier, Martin Scorsese et al.

Penn is too muddleheaded, openly narcissistic, and unsophisticated to make the grade. No doubt as well, in certain quarters he continues to be punished for his once-upon-a-time vaguely anti-establishment, anti-war comments. So, for a number of reasons, his film takes a beating.

Like Steven Soderbergh’s *Logan Lucky*, *The Last Face* is an “independent” production, whatever that precisely means today.

Neither film did well with the public, nor deserved to, but the film industry’s woes go far beyond the commercial fate of these *relatively* inexpensive efforts.

The American film industry is deservedly undergoing one of its worst summers in recent memory. Trade publication *Hollywood Reporter* noted August 15, “Summer revenue is already pacing 12 percent behind last year and could end up down 15 percent, one of the worst declines in modern history. Call it the August Death March at the domestic box office. Over the Aug. 11-13 weekend, revenue plunged 32 percent behind the same frame last year.”

The same publication commented two weeks later, “By the time Labor Day weekend wraps, summer box-office revenue in North America will end up being down nearly 16 percent over last year, the steepest decline in modern times and eclipsing the 14.6 percent dip in 2014. It will also be the first time since 2006 that [a] summer didn’t clear \$4 billion. That’s according to comScore, which is predicting that revenue will come in at roughly \$3.78 billion (a 15.7 percent decline). Attendance also plummeted, and is almost assured of hitting a 25-year low in terms of the number of tickets sold, according to Box Office Mojo.”

The public is displaying good taste in boycotting the miserable collection of empty, stupid sequels, cartoons and tedious, special effects-laden “action” films.



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