

Two short films: *The Overcoat*, based on the Nikolai Gogol story, and *Detainment*, about the Jamie Bulger murder case

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The Overcoat is a short film, directed by Patrick Myles, based on the famed short story by Russian author Nikolai Gogol, published in 1842.

The film follows the general outlines of the original, more or less updated to the present day. Here, in a pub, a man (Tim Key) relates the comic-tragic tale to a group of friends.

The narrator explains that the hero of the story, Christopher Cobbler [Akaky Akakievitch Bashmachkin in the Gogol work: “bashmak” is a type of shoe], is a proofreader—in “a massive, faceless government building,” according to the film’s notes.

Cobbler (Jason Watkins) is a mild-mannered nonentity, or so it seems. He loves his work because of its unvarying regularity. Never deviating from routine in his “leisure hours” either, he reads the same newspaper, eats the same meals and goes to bed at the same time every day. (Gogol writes that when and how his story’s protagonist entered government service “and who appointed him, no one could remember. However many of his superiors might come and go, he was always seen in the same spot, in the same attitude, busy with the same work, and bearing the same title; so that people began to believe he had come into the world just as he was, with his bald forehead and official uniform.”)

Christopher, in his dullness and stodginess, is an easy target for the mockery of his younger colleagues at work. At one point, he responds to his tormentors, “Why do you not just leave me alone? Why do you pester me?” One of the sources of his colleagues’ derision is a threadbare old overcoat: “Ditch that old thing. ... You look like a hobo.”

The poor, harassed proofreader is finally obliged to consult a not very reputable or flourishing tailor (Dominic Coleman) about repairing his coat, only to be told it cannot be done, the material is simply too worn. Christopher protests, “I can’t afford a new overcoat on my salary.” For his part, the tailor is surprised the garment still continues to offer “any solace at all against the northern cold.”

Cobbler finally recognizes he needs a new overcoat. For months, he scrimps and saves, virtually starving himself. As the narrator in Myles’ film explains, Christopher “allowed himself no luxury ... all he could think about was his new overcoat ... every day was a quest to save money.” Finally, the great day arrives, and he takes ownership of the luxurious new winter coat, which he practically sinks into. Now when he enters his office, people take notice. “Gorgeous overcoat, is it new?”

An attractive colleague invites Christopher to her birthday party that same evening, along with a few friends from work. A couple of glasses of something interesting to drink—and it goes to Cobbler’s head. Unfortunately, he still remains more interested in the pristine state of his coat than the flirtatious advances of his workmate. In any event, when he finally leaves the pub, a little tipsy, tragedy strikes! In a darkened street, two thugs rob of him his new overcoat ... and punch him in the face for good measure.

The police prove indifferent, skeptical or worse. The same workmate then suggests, “You need to go to the top ... the very top.” Without an appointment, the wretched but outraged Cobbler attempts to see a high-level government official.

(Gogol describes this “important personage” in these words: “It was not known what position this personage occupied, nor how high it really was; the only facts known were that he had only recently been placed in it, and that there must be still higher personages than himself, as he was leaving no stone unturned in order to get promotion. When he entered his private room, he made his subordinates wait for him on the stairs below, and no one had direct access to him.”)

Cobbler breaks in on this important man, who—naturally—is having a thoroughly unimportant conversation, brandy or whiskey glass in hand, with another official. The lowly proofreader manages to stammer out, “My overcoat was stolen from me—my expensive overcoat.” The official’s secretary is irate: “This is unprecedented.” The “important personage” himself is even more furious: “My dear sir, are you not acquainted with good form and due procedure?” He outlines some complicated bureaucratic process that would lead to the complaint ending up on his secretary’s desk.

When Cobbler mutters something about secretaries being “untrustworthy,” it’s the final straw. The livid “personage” explodes. He screams at the trembling, cowering fellow: “Untrustworthy? Do you know who you are addressing? Do you know in whose office you currently stand? Well, do you?” Cobbler, who has never before faced such verbal abuse, simply faints dead away.

The film’s narrator explains, “This incident sent Christopher into a downward spiral from which there was no return—his fever was worsening by the day.” Soon, “Christopher was gone.” With no money for a proper funeral, Cobbler is buried in an unmarked, pauper’s grave. (Gogol: “The great city of St Petersburg continued its life as though he had never existed. Thus disappeared a human creature who had never possessed a patron or friend, who had never elicited real hearty sympathy from anyone.”)

However, that is not apparently the end of Cobbler. An apparition begins to appear in various parts of the city who tries “to tear overcoats off,” including the coat of the very “important personage,” who experiences the appropriate terror at the ghastly, ghostly appearance of his former victim.

(Gogol writes that all of a sudden the prominent official “felt a powerful hand seize him by the collar. He turned round, perceived a short man in an old, shabby uniform,” who opened his mouth “from which issued a kind of corpse-like odour.” The official “heard him say, ‘At last I have you—by the collar! I need your cloak. You did not trouble about me when I was in distress; you thought it necessary to reprimand me. Now give me your

cloak.”)

Gogol (1809-52) is an important figure in Russian and European literature. *The Overcoat* is considered to be one of the landmarks in the development of Russian literary realism, which ultimately helped discredit and undermine tsarist society. Whatever Gogol’s own political or social views, which were quite conservative, the work is a scathing indictment of a corrupt, cruel and essentially unsalvageable social order, as well as a criticism of those who absorb and accept its reactionary, inhuman values.

The Overcoat, in its own way, is a classic illustration of the fact that “realism” should not be identified uncritically with the specific trend known as Realism, or Naturalism, i.e., the attempt to reproduce everyday life in fiction. Critics still stumble over this. Gogol’s story cannot be considered “realistic,” we are told, because it includes elements of the surreal, grotesque, even supernatural and because it shifts quite radically in tone. But the story is profoundly realistic in the more important, social and psychological sense.

In a 20-minute film, Myles—an actor trained at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School, a producer and a filmmaker—cannot be expected to bring out all the elements of Gogol’s work, into whose two dozen or so pages are compressed an immensity of insight and numerous alternately amusing and distressing episodes. The film, which has won awards and been screened at various film festivals, tends to emphasize the comic sides of the story at the expense of its darker features.

Nonetheless, Myles, who has worked extensively in the theater, deserves credit for adapting and directing audiences toward this classic work, and its themes. He told an interviewer from Flicks Daily that *The Overcoat* is the “story of a man who, in an attempt to raise his status at work, spends all his money on a brand new overcoat. After a short period of social success, the overcoat is stolen from him and he descends into a spiral, unable to return to his previous anonymity. It’s a tragicomedy that touches on several themes such as individuality, social status and bureaucratic oppression and it’s set in a world that is almost our own, but not quite.”

Detainment

Detainment is also a short film, about the aftermath of the murder of two-year-old Jamie Bulger from Kirkby, Merseyside, England in February 1993. The arrest and prosecution of two 10-year-old boys, Jon Venables and Robert Thompson, became the occasion for an outpouring of law-and-order hysteria from both Conservative and Labour politicians and the media.

The film, directed by Irish-born Vincent Lambe, bases itself entirely on police interview transcripts and records. It is a fictional recreation of the interrogation of the two young boys, who were eventually tried and convicted in an adult court under “Britain’s appallingly low age of criminal responsibility,” as the *World Socialist Web Site* noted in 2000.

Lambe has taken and rearranged portions of the transcripts in a relatively sensitive and compassionate manner. The boys are well played by young actors (Ely Solan as Jon and Leon Hughes as Robert). Their parents also play a role, and some of the scenes are quite disturbing and moving.

Lambe told an interviewer he was prompted to make the film after someone unexpectedly mentioned the Bulger case. “I thought of those two boys,” he said, “who terrified us with their malice all those years ago. I couldn’t understand how two ten year-old boys could commit such a horrific crime.

“A lot of people will tell you they were simply ‘evil.’ I think it’s easier to label them ‘evil’ than to try to understand the unfathomable mystery of

human behaviour. But I wanted to learn more and I started reading everything I could find on the case. ... By the end, I found that my opinion had been altered and I would hope that people watching the film might have a similar experience.”

Presumably, Lambe means that he found it necessary to transform the two “monsters,” as they were painted in the tabloid media, back into actual human beings. *Detainment* undoubtedly succeeds in doing that.

However, as per the comment above on Gogol and realism, the mere reproduction of events does not necessarily reveal their most important truth. Aside from a few shots of an obviously poverty-stricken region, Lambe’s film does not provide a great deal of insight into the social and psychological processes, including the devastating decay and decline of Britain’s once industrial areas, that made the Bulger murder possible.

A broader, more socially critical outlook is necessary for that. The WSWs, for example, explained that at the time of the killing, Britain’s “media pundits, as always, welcomed any sensational story on which to hang their own right-wing prejudices. ... Instead of seeking a social or psychological explanation of why the two young boys had become embroiled in a violent act against a defenceless child, it was considered enough to deem them inherently ‘evil,’” or to argue that “their ‘warped minds’ had tried to emulate” a popular horror movie.

When the case came to court in November 1993, “screaming mobs demanded life imprisonment or the death penalty and tried to physically attack the police van carrying the two boys. Inside the courtroom, a disgraceful spectacle unfolded. The floor of the dock had to be specially raised so the boys could see the proceedings. The deliberations carried on around the two bewildered and frightened children, who by turns stared ahead uncomprehendingly, fidgeted or cried and begged for their mothers. Neither boy gave evidence, as they were suffering severe post-traumatic stress disorder.”

Important details of “Thompson’s and Venables’ backgrounds—which provide at least some insight as to why they ended up attacking young Jamie—were not admitted in evidence.

“Thompson was one of seven brothers, in a family where the older children regularly attacked the younger ones such as Robert. His mother was an alcoholic and his father, who left home when Robert was five, was also a heavy drinker who beat his wife and children. Venables’ parents were also separated and his mother suffered psychiatric problems. His brother and sister had educational problems and attended special needs schools. Following his parents’ separation, Venables manifested disturbed behaviour. At school he would regularly bang his head on walls or slash himself with scissors.”

Lambe’s film is a sincere effort, but it stops short at genuinely countering and rebutting the self-serving banality and filth generated by official public opinion.



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