

Guillermo del Toro's *Nightmare Alley*: The rise and fall of an American huckster

Joanne Laurier
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Directed by Guillermo del Toro; co-written by del Toro and Kim Morgan; based on the novel by William Lindsay Gresham

Mexican filmmaker Guillermo del Toro's *Nightmare Alley*, a "neo-noir" thriller jointly scripted by del Toro and Kim Morgan, is based on the 1946 novel of the same title by William Lindsay Gresham (1909-1962) about a mentalist/con man who flies too close to the sun. A 1947 film adaptation of the same book, directed by Edmund Goulding, written by Jules Furthman and featuring Tyrone Power, is a remarkable and disturbing work.

A refashioning of the Gresham novel, an auspicious project, demonstrates serious intentions on the part of the imaginative del Toro (*Shape of Water*, *Pan's Labyrinth*). The work's very title is suggestive of a criticism of the "American Dream," as Gresham no doubt intended it to be. The Goulding-Furthman-Power work helped pulverize the myth. While del Toro's movie features his trademark technological dazzlement and panache and a much bleaker overall look, it falls considerably short of its more enlightened and more focused film predecessor.

Set in the years 1939 to 1941, the new film stars Bradley Cooper as Stanton Carlisle, a man fleeing a painful past. During a torrential downpour, the down-and-out drifter stumbles into a traveling carnival, prepared to perform any task in exchange for food and shelter. Without further ado, chiseled-faced carny boss Clem (Willem Dafoe) sets him to work. Bizarrely, Clem also shows Stan his prized collection of pickled fetuses, human and otherwise (the "Unborn Wonders of Nature"). He also maintains a "geek," a carnival attraction so damaged by alcohol and drug addiction, so mentally and physically abused, that he performs the most degrading acts.

(Del Toro explains in an interview that the "carnival geeks were usually opium junkies or alcoholics deprived of their fix, willing to do anything to avoid withdrawal. In the carnival hierarchy, the geek was the lowest in their societal pecking order, reviled and pitied even by carnies. Pulled from dark alleys in the dead of night, the geek is everything Stanton fears about himself.")

In the tawdry, chaotic carny world of the "Odd-i-torium" and the "House of Damnation," Stan hooks up with fortune-teller Zeena (Toni Collette) and her kindly, but alcoholic husband Pete (David Strathairn). The couple were once big-time operators, having developed an act based on a complex, coded system, in which a blind-folded "mentalist" claims to be able to read audience members minds or identify objects that an assistant holds up. When the ever ambitious Stan inadvertently hastens Pete's death,

he becomes the possessor of the code book, a valuable and lucrative tool of psychic manipulation.

Ready to move on to greener pastures, Stan is assisted by the naïve, devoted Molly (Rooney Mara), now his wife, in the development of his own nightclub act. Buffalo, New York's high society becomes his particular mark. Stan parasitically feeds off their wealth—and their illusions, including about the possibility of communicating with the spirits of the dead.

The ultra-chilly Dr. Lilith Ritter (Cate Blanchett), a psychoanalyst to the rich, enters the picture. She partners with Stan to fleece her clientele. Lilith's recordings of her analysis sessions with members of the elite, such as a judge's wife (Mary Steenburgen) mourning her dead soldier son, provide the inside information that Stan needs for his "spiritualist" con game.

The invaluable tips, however, come with Lilith's warning that "if you displease the right people, the world closes in on you very, very fast." And one of the most dangerous people to displease is wealthy industrialist Ezra Grindle (Richard Jenkins), a man so well-moneyed he believes he can buy redemption for past sins ("I have many crimes on my conscience"). In attempting to outwit the rich and powerful, including Grindle, Stan ultimately becomes another one of their countless victims, and plummets to the very lower depths.

Del Toro has made numerous interesting statements about the book on which he based his film. He told the *L.A. Times*, for example, that the "novel is so absolutely an indictment of the American dream, the capitalist ideals. I think Gresham came to a very disillusioned conclusion about the way the system is rigged." The filmmaker added, "There's a great line in the middle of the book—I'm going to misquote it—but he says, 'What kind of God would create this slaughterhouse of a world?'"

In the movie's production notes, Blanchett, for her part, asserted that *Nightmare Alley* "has all the dark underpinnings of what seems to be a very polite society ... The world of the carnival might have some trickery and deceit, but it has the beating heart of a true community. It is the high society in this film that is far more threatening and terrifying." Dafoe described the film to an interviewer as "an indictment of a certain kind of ambition, or a certain kind of capitalism, or a certain kind of exploitation of other people for your happiness."

"The carnival is almost like a microcosm of the world," del Toro told *Vanity Fair*. "Everybody's there to swindle everybody." In fact, the director has gone out of his way to offer generally anti-

establishment observations in regard to his most recent film. Clearly, del Toro and Morgan wanted to strongly criticize what they consider to be an appalling social and political situation.

Unfortunately, despite its promising or potentially compelling elements, this version of *Nightmare Alley* misfires. It is possible to envision the same project succeeding artistically and as social critique, but the filmmakers would have to be guided by clearer and more profound insights into contemporary reality. As it is, their wholly legitimate sentiments lose power, dissolve and get poured into largely secondary and tertiary matters, such as costumes, ostentatious art deco sets and a murky, pseudo-film noir look.

The biggest problem is the film's generally misanthropic, morbid outlook. Things often turn upside down when artists focus so one-sidedly on the sordidness of individual human behavior. Almost inevitably, such a work ends up suggesting that the characters' selfishness and ruthlessness produce the external conditions, rather than the other way around. *Nightmare Alley*, intentionally or not, ends up suggesting that the population is to blame for society's ills and their own downtrodden state.

The artistic results of this melancholy conception come in the form of unnecessarily grotesque imagery and a tedious, turgid pace. Del Toro and Morgan dull their own oppositional viewpoint, submerging it, quite literally, in mud and sludge. The actors are generally encouraged to create mean-spirited caricatures rather than fully fledged human beings. Blanchett especially tilts the scale toward glacial smugness. Cooper does his best but can't extricate himself from mere noir imitation. To the movie's detriment, the filmmakers seem more concerned with making an impression, a cinematic splash, than in developing the drama and social analysis. Collette and Strathairn are the exceptions, adding much needed warmth and personality.

The 1946 novel and 1947 film take a different approach.

Accounts of Gresham's life do not make happy reading—a serious alcoholic who turned to mysticism in later life, he committed suicide in September 1962. In the late 1930s, however, he clearly held left-wing views. The late journalist and biographer Nick Tosches notes that Gresham was “one of the international volunteers who had come to defend the Republic in the lost cause of the Spanish Civil War.”

More specifically, Gresham served in the John Brown artillery unit of the Communist Party-organized Abraham Lincoln Brigade. The writer later attributed the origin of *Nightmare Alley* to conversations he had, while serving as a volunteer medic for the Loyalist forces, with a former carnival worker, who told him, among other things, about the wretched “geeks.” (The tragic fate of the Spanish Civil War, of course, cannot have helped Gresham's moral or psychological crisis.)

According to Tosches: “Gresham was only twenty-nine then. As he would later tell it, ‘the story of the geek haunted me. Finally, to get rid of it, I had to write it out. The novel, of which it was the frame, seemed to horrify readers as much as the original story had horrified me.’”

The reality of carnival life, with its elements of cruelty and deception, clearly fascinated and appalled Gresham. But the novel and 1947 film speak to other phenomena as well, including

charismatic, Elmer Gantry-like evangelist fakers and media celebrities such as Aimee Semple McPherson and the like.

The British-born Goulding, known for his “tasteful” 1930s melodramas, turned his hand to something sharper and more abrasive in *Nightmare Alley*, under the influence of the generally radicalized conditions of the immediate postwar years. That one of the 1947 film's central concerns is to paint American capitalism, or important aspects of it, as a “nightmare” is hard to miss.

Lead actor Tyrone Power brought his traumas back from World War II onto the film set. He reportedly came back from the war an angrier man, and this is one of his best performances. Both Power as Stan and Helen Walker as Lilith are grifters, flawed products of a dog-eat-dog social order. Palpable in the movie is the fact that the “geek” is a symbol of society's victims. The Depression and the war are woven into the moral fabric of the film. This is the era of Charlie Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux*, a world in which small-scale criminals come to grief, get smashed up, while the real murderers and giant crooks—the higher ups—go scot-free.

The Goulding-Power adaptation of Gresham's novel rapidly and directly highlight the class issues. In the film's opening scenes, writes a commentator on *Slant*, “Goulding and cinematographer Lee Garmes effortlessly conjure such associations, contrasting attractive and charismatic performers, such as Zeena (Joan Blondell) and Stan Carlisle (Tyrone Power), with the exploitive bosses and virtual slaves who drive the behind-the-scenes machinery of the shows...The film's title is virtually literalized by the setting, which is eventually offered up as a synecdoche of capitalist America and the dueling spells of potential success and doom that it posits. Yet the title also has a psychological dimension, suggesting the moral peril of giving in to the desires that capitalism so easily monetizes.”

At the same time, although certain features of the 1947 *Nightmare Alley* are grim, it never accuses its human figures as such. The movie treats the lowliest of the characters with sympathy and indicts the manner in which they are manipulated by more powerful forces.

The notion that so-called film noir (postwar American realism) was cynical and misanthropic has been debunked by film historian and critic James Naremore, among others. There was a powerful reaction against fascism and its crimes among a generally left-wing layer of writers, directors and actors, and an understanding that some of the same toxic trends and forces were operating in the US. Indeed, as Naremore writes, “There is good reason to conclude that the first decade of American film noir was largely the product of a socially committed fraction or artistic movement in Hollywood.”

A genuine opportunity has been missed here. Most importantly, what del Toro and his talented collaborators have not accomplished is help educate and inoculate the population about American capitalism's ideological machinations and social crimes.



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