

The Worst Person in the World: A young woman in Oslo finds herself

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Directed by Joachim Trier; written by Trier and Eskil Vogt

The Worst Person in the World is a film by Norwegian director Joachim Trier (*Oslo, August 31st*, *Louder Than Bombs* and *Thelma*). The film was nominated for the Palme d'Or at the 2021 Cannes film festival and Renate Reinsve, the film's lead performer, won the Best Actress award at the same event. Trier's film was also named the Best Foreign Language film by the New York Film Critics Circle and one of the Top Five Foreign Language Films by the National Board of Review. It was nominated as well for an Academy Award in the Best Original Screenplay and Best International Feature Film categories, but did not triumph.

Reinsve plays Julie, a young woman in her late 20s living in Oslo (she turns 30 in the course of the film). We first see her as a medical student. She gives that up for psychology, then for photography and, for a time, writing. She takes up with a number of men. The most important of those are Aksel (Anders Danielsen Lie), a comic book artist 15 years her senior, and Eivind (Herbert Nordrum), who works in a coffee shop.

Julie has a difficult relationship with her father, Per Harald (Vidar Sandem), who divorced her mother and has a second family. He largely neglects her. In addition to uncertainty as to her career path, Julie is conflicted about whether or not to have children. After Julie's break-up with Aksel, he develops cancer. Meanwhile she becomes dissatisfied with Eivind, because he is not ambitious enough.

Julie is not, of course, the "worst person in the world," nor is anyone else here. But the filmmakers, who unreservedly accept the life-conditions and ideological assumptions of the Oslo petty bourgeoisie as the entire contents of their artistic and psychological

universe, might have considered scrutinizing her conduct more carefully, or at least calling into question *her* and *their* assumptions.

Instead, apparently, we are meant to sympathize with Julie when she feels ignored at a launch party for one of Aksel's books and later during a family dinner when he complains bitterly about how his artistic efforts have been made "respectable." She leaves, or yawns and looks unhappy. It would be better, she must be thinking, if it were *her* book being launched and if *she* had the floor at the family event. What if we draw the conclusion, on the other hand, that Julie is rather self-centered? Furthermore, does the possibility exist that Aksel is more interesting and talented than she, and that she might learn something from him?

And there is the moment when Julie angrily upbraids Eivind because his response to one of her writings is not informed or sophisticated enough and, on top of that, angrily asks him if he will be satisfied serving coffee until he is 50. The filmmakers may be encouraging a somewhat more unfavorable attitude here. Whether they are or not, one is certainly tempted to find her a self-pitying snob in such scenes.

Julie is not always unappealing by any means and her behavior is entirely reasonable much of the time. However, in her own quiet fashion, at critical junctures, she can be quite selfish and ruthless.

In any event, that is not the principal problem. The reader may have gathered by this time that a greater concern is the largely inconsequential character of the themes and situations taken up in *The Worst Person in the World*.

There are promising images of Oslo in the film. We would like to know what is going on in this or that neighborhood, behind the closed doors, or in the port area. The film actually hems us in.

The problem is not even the specific milieu as such. Significant drama exists everywhere, if it is sought out. Norway is frequently perceived as a social paradise, at least by comparison with the brutality and inequality of the US, where the “social safety net” has all but been done away with and the desperate are left to fend for themselves. However, “Norway is riven by a deep social gulf,” the WSWS has pointed out. A 2018 report “noted that the richest 10 percent of Norwegians own 60 percent of the country’s wealth. The top 1 percent controls 21 percent of total wealth. ... Statistics Norway researcher Rolf Aaberge compared the levels of wealth inequality in the country to those found in Britain and France.” Norway was also, of course, the scene of one of the most horrific far-right mass murders, the July 2011 killing of 77 people by fascist Anders Breivik.

Certain problems and situations lead on to important discoveries about life, whereas others don’t. A critic asserts that the themes of *The Worst Person in the World* “are very important: who do you fall in love with? Who is ‘the one’? When do you realise that you are just settling?” Dilemmas can be of the smallest scope, but, in the final analysis, they need to speak to the immense social collisions of the time. Otherwise, why will anyone bother about them? Who will they affect deeply?

The German novelist Theodor Fontane, in the late 19th century, described the theme of one his books in these terms: “A great idea, a great moment, breaks into very simple human conditions.” The editor of Fontane’s novel goes on to suggest that “the incongruity between spectacular deeds and mediocre doers ... has become one of the most terrible themes of our age.” But, in Trier’s film, along with others today, we witness *insignificant* ideas breaking into “very simple human conditions,” we encounter *mediocre* deeds and “mediocre doers.”

In Henrik Ibsen’s *The Pillars of Society* (1877), a small Norwegian town’s richest and most prominent citizen, Karsten Bernick, a shipbuilder, runs into difficulty when his wife’s younger brother returns from America after 15 years. The central “pillar” of the community had escaped vexing problems by blaming various misdeeds on the departing young man. Now they come back to haunt him. At the play’s conclusion, Bernick publicly accepts responsibility for his actions and is more or less forgiven by the townspeople.

The Russian Marxist Plekhanov commented sardonically about the play’s message: “If you play about with actresses, you must own up to it, and not wrongfully accuse your neighbours. The same with money: if no one has stolen your money, you must not pretend that you have been robbed. ... Let everyone obey this noble morality, and the age of ineffable social welfare will soon dawn.”

“A mountain has produced a mouse!” Plekhanov exclaimed. “In this fine drama the spirit has ‘revolted’ only in order to calm down, by uttering one of the most trite and boring commonplaces. It can hardly be necessary to add that such an obviously childish resolution of the dramatic conflict could not fail to detract from the play’s aesthetic merit.”

It can hardly be necessary to add that if Plekhanov was correct about such a relatively gigantic figure as Ibsen, and he was, what are we to conclude about our contemporary Norwegian “mountains”?



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