

Vengeance: B.J. Novak's directorial debut

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The 2022 film *Vengeance*, now available on Amazon Prime, opens with a humorous dialogue between two young professionals at a New York City cocktail party. The two men are enthusiastically reinforcing each other's commitments to hedonism—and to perceiving themselves as unique geniuses. One of them, Ben Manalowitz (B.J. Novak), affirms everything his friend says with a staccato “A hundred percent.” The rest of the film follows Ben’s education in the foolishness of thinking one understands anything “a hundred percent.”

Novak, best known for his role as the scheming temp Ryan on the television series *The Office*, wrote and makes his directorial debut with *Vengeance*. The film is both a dark comedy and a mystery, succeeding in each category, with some glittering dialogue and engaging plot twists. More than this, *Vengeance* attempts a critique of contemporary American society at once thoughtful and compassionate toward the human condition, even if this critique is explicitly presented in speeches throughout the movie, which leave little room to the imagination.

Manalowitz is a successful writer for the *New Yorker* magazine with aspirations of launching a podcast that will go viral, but he is told by podcast star-maker Eloise (Issa Rae) that he has no story, that his “pitch” (the characters in New York are endlessly pitching) is all brain and no heart. That night Ben is awakened by a phone call, a man weeping and telling him that “Abby” has died. A frantic search through his phone’s brimming index of past hookups reveals that Abby (Lio Tipton) was a sex partner of Ben’s some months prior.

The man on the phone is Abby’s brother, and he thinks Ben is Abby’s boyfriend, which is apparently what she led her family to believe. Sensing a story with “heart” for his podcast, Ben decides to play the role of the grieving boyfriend and tells the caller he will attend Abby’s (full name Abilene Shaw) funeral in Texas.

Once in Texas, Ben is told by Abby’s excitable brother Ty (Boyd Holbrook) that in fact Abby was murdered. “By a Mexican druglord ... the government ... This thing goes deep!” Ty then tells Ben that together they will avenge

her death. Ben is intrigued, thinking he has stumbled upon a contemporary American gothic and podcast gold.

Ben ingratiates himself with the Shaw family, revealing he is a podcaster and would like to record and broadcast their story. The family is delighted. He is fascinated, though he does not tell them so, both by the bleakness of their lives and their eagerness to believe in sweeping conspiracy theories, especially their readiness to apply such theories to Abby’s death. So far, though, he maintains the lie that he was her boyfriend.

Vengeance makes much of the visual and cultural contrast between the polished world of acquisitive New York media professionals and the desolate Texas plains. Novak in his film, and Ben in his podcast, use the Shaw family to represent the America they see outside New York, a country of hopelessness and a failed education system dominated by addictions to opioids and social media. Novak is savvy enough, however, to make Ben as ignorant as the people he condescends to. When the proud and paranoid Granny Shaw (Louanne Stephens) recounts the story of the Alamo at her family’s request, she is shocked to find that Ben does not know the Mexicans won the 1836 battle.

A Hollywood film that plays upon the city-slicker-goes-country premise usually ends up sentimentalizing country folk and their “down home” ways, and in this regard Novak scores points with *Vengeance*. The Shaw family, though they love each other and manage to find a few elements in their environment to enjoy (“Whataburger! It’s good because *it’s right there!*”), are intensely unhappy. The opioid epidemic of rural America is not a passing reference in the movie, but an implacable fixture that comes to play a major part in the plot. Abby’s sisters, Paris (Isabella Amara) and Kansas City (Dove Cameron), have aspirations not only beyond their reach but beyond their ability to imagine, and their mother Sharon (played affectingly by J. Smith Cameron) is a smiling but broken-hearted woman for whom all of life, she says, is regret.

One character who indulges and/or preys upon the aspirations of young people in this unnamed part of Texas

is music producer Quentin Sellers (Ashton Kutcher), a philosophically minded hustler who claims to have gone to Yale (“New Haven” he tells Ben), is as fast-talking as Ben and produced recordings for the talented Abby. Kutcher portrays Quentin with an impressive blend of seductiveness and menace.

A word must be said here about the film’s fine cinematography by Lyn Moncrief. *Vengeance* features some stunning images that capture simultaneously the beauty and unforgiving barrenness of the Texas landscape. And the scenes shot inside the Whataburger convey perfectly the garish fluorescent lifelessness of such eateries.

As mentioned above, the mystery of Abby’s death takes Ben and the viewer through a number of surprising twists and turns, but each one heightens the thematic stakes as well. With the final turns, though, *Vengeance* runs up against its limitations. While Novak pokes fun at Ben’s pretentiousness, his film is just as ambitious as Ben’s podcast, attempting to figure out something essential about America. Ben’s shortcoming through most of the movie is that he underestimates the complexity of the lives he exposes to the world. Novak’s shortcoming is that he overstates that complexity, avoiding the burning social realities in front of his face.

In one scene, set up so that it has the full endorsement of Novak himself, Sharon tells Ben that people turn to drugs because they are unhappy. And there the revelation ends. Elsewhere in the film it is suggested that the determining factor in Americans’ happiness or unhappiness—and in this New York and Texas are the same—is the ubiquity, and immortality, of digital media. We have become slaves to our recorded selves, or something.

In other words, the immiseration of Texas and the “emptiness” of promiscuous New York are ultimately a matter of attitudes. The attitudes people bring to media, to each other and to their own existence. What’s needed, the film concludes, is the right *balance* of head and heart, of freedom and love, of New York and Texas. Such a conclusion forgets that the unhappiness Sharon talked about has objective causes, and these causes are not that difficult to see.

First, Novak is right to feature the opioid epidemic in a film set in rural Texas. If the Texas Department of Health and Human Services is to be believed, one in four people in the state has overdosed or knows someone who has. And Texas is not among the highest opioid-using states.

According to the federal government’s National

Institute on Drug Abuse, 47,600 people in the US died of a drug overdose in 2017, with the numbers remaining about the same through 2019. But in 2020, that figure shot up to 68,630 reported deaths. In 2021, there were 80,411 reported overdose deaths in the country. It would seem safe to say that the most significant variable in the upsurge of overdose deaths has been the COVID-19 pandemic.

Yet the pandemic does not get so much as a mention in *Vengeance*. Let alone the fact that the US government, and all the state governments, have served the interests of the ruling elite in foisting a homicidal profits-before-lives policy upon the population. This silence on the pandemic is particularly deafening in a film that began shooting in March of 2020 but had to halt temporarily because of COVID.

Second, according to everytexan.org, Texas has one of the highest rates of child food insecurity in the nation, at nearly 22 percent, or almost 1.6 million children. While the Shaws are clearly a working class family, *Vengeance* does not register economic hardship as a factor in drug abuse. Nor is the condition of unprecedented social inequality in the US seen as anything but a cultural difference, between New York and rural Texas for instance.

Finally, although the Confederate flag makes a brief appearance in the film, the emergence in the US of a far-right political movement is relegated mostly to joking references to conspiracy theories. And war, like the pandemic, goes unmentioned in *Vengeance*, though the US has been conducting imperialist warfare around the globe for the last 30 years. All these objective factors send the message to young people like Abby Shaw that human life is worth little. While she and her family may not fully see that, the filmmakers should.

Novak is a talented writer and director, and *Vengeance* is a smart, amusing film, but its perspective is sorely limited by a muddled, subjective understanding of reality. Texas is not simply a state of mind.



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