

Nickel Boys ignores history in favor of psychology

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Nickel Boys (2024), a film adaptation of the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Nickel Boys* (2019) by Colson Whitehead, is a contender for best picture at the upcoming Academy Awards.

Set in the 1960s, the story follows a studious and idealistic black teenager in Florida who is unjustly sent to a segregated reform school where physical abuse is rampant. The story is based on the Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys, which operated in Florida for 111 years before decades of complaints and belated state and federal investigations finally led to its closure.

Nickel Boys is the first narrative feature directed by RaMell Ross, who is known for his documentary *Hale County This Morning, This Evening* (2018). To his credit, Ross did not simply film the book, as it were. Recognizing that film is its own medium, he made use of some of the formal possibilities that it offers. At times, Ross's techniques vividly evoke the sultry setting and conjure a sense of foreboding. But just as often, they create a distancing effect.

The more serious problem is that Ross focuses on the subjective experience of his two protagonists, largely disregarding the material conditions that shape this experience. Questions as serious as racism and terroristic violence cannot be grasped purely on a psychological or individual level. A social and historical approach that considers objective, material conditions is required. Ross rejects such a method in favor of a subjectivity that aligns neatly with reactionary racist and nationalist perspectives. Racism is presented as a free-floating, implicitly eternal menace.

Growing up in Tallahassee, Elwood (Ethan Herisse) shows an interest in reading and in the contemporaneous struggle for civil rights. He is raised by his grandmother Hattie (Aunjanue Ellis-Taylor), a

warm and steady presence who expresses concern about Elwood's eagerness to participate in protests. Her fear for Elwood's safety is mingled with her doubts about whether Jim Crow can be defeated.

Mr. Hill (Jimmie Fails), Elwood's high school teacher, encourages his student's interest in activism. Hill himself is a Freedom Rider (an activist who challenged the segregation of buses in the South) who has endured at least one beating. Seeing Elwood's academic promise, he also encourages the young man to enroll, free of charge, in an accelerated study program at a predominantly black college. While walking to campus on the first day of classes, Elwood unfortunately accepts a ride from a man who turns out to be driving a stolen car.

This mischance becomes the authorities' pretext for sending Elwood to Nickel Academy, a segregated reform school (in actuality, a decrepit workhouse that exploits the young men for profit). For those who step out of line, and even for innocent bystanders, discipline is swift and harsh. The most feared punishments include the "White House," where the young men are whipped, and "Hell," which is a sweatbox. Most ominously, some offenders are "taken out back" and never seen again.

Fellow student Turner (Brandon Wilson) becomes Elwood's friend and protector. While Elwood insists on justice and principle, Turner is pragmatic. Though he appears to sympathize with Elwood's ideals, he encourages him simply to stay out of trouble.

Elwood and Turner are "asked" to do odd jobs for members of the school administration. Knowing that this practice is illegal, Elwood keeps a scrupulous record of every job that they perform, when they performed it and for whom. This record gets Elwood into trouble, which prompts a distraught Turner to plan

their escape from Nickel Academy.

Like the novel, the film occasionally interrupts this story with episodes from the present day. A man (Daveed Diggs), presumably an older Elwood, reads reports of bodies that have been discovered on the grounds of Nickel Academy, as well as new testimonies of abuse. These reports, and his chance encounter with another Nickel Academy alumnus, force him to confront his experience at the school. Should he come forward to tell his own story?

Because they are such a noticeable and integral part of the film, the directorial choices that Ross makes deserve consideration. Most of *Nickel Boys* is filmed from Elwood's point of view, and Ross frequently uses a handheld camera. At times, these choices bring immediacy to the action and heighten the viewer's responses to it. Yet the techniques conversely lend the film an artificial, rather than naturalistic character.

Other techniques give the film a dreamlike, haunting quality that is not present in the novel. Scenes are sometimes shown in soft focus, and dialogue is occasionally delivered more slowly than in everyday life. Though the film compresses the action in the novel, it unfolds at a leisurely pace. To some extent, these factors distance the action from reality.

Montages of civil rights leaders (e.g., Martin Luther King Jr. and Harry Belafonte), the Apollo 8 space program and the men's marathon at the 1960 Summer Olympics (which was the first to be won by a sub-Saharan African: Abebe Bikila) sometimes interrupt the story. This footage is likely intended to provide historical context for the story, yet its inclusion has a faintly perfunctory air. It takes the place of a genuine attempt to grapple with the period. And if the footage is meant to provide commentary on Elwood and Turner's situation, then the message remains vague.

A related problem is the film's failure to ask how a school like Nickel could continue to operate. Ross does not ask what class interests such workhouses (or racism in general) served or why the state would turn a blind eye to the torture and even murder that they committed. In the hands of the corporations and their political parties, racism was, and remains, a weapon for pitting workers against each other and forestalling a united rebellion against wage slavery. Schools like Nickel helped terrorize workers and youth.

The closest approach that the film makes to these

questions arises while Elwood and Turner are painting a school administrator's house. "I saw those college kids in Tampa with their nice shirts and ties sitting at the Woolworth's," Turner tells Elwood. "I had to work, but they were out there protesting. And it happened. They opened that counter, but, I mean, I didn't have the money to eat there either way. Gotta change the economics to all this, too." But the film goes no further down this road.

Instead, *Nickel Boys* presents racism as the sole motivation for the horrific abuse at Nickel Academy. The University of South Florida's 2012 investigation of Dozier, the school on which the fictional Nickel Academy is modeled, determined that white students died at the school as well as black students — and that both groups of students faced a similar risk of being killed. These children came from the most oppressed layers of the working class and were being punished for offenses as minor as truancy or perceived "incurability."

None of this context appears in the film, which focuses mainly on the relationship of the two young men. In his effort to portray "black boyhood," Ross sweeps aside or obscures important historical issues. A subjective, ahistorical approach is also employed by those, like the authors and sponsors of the 1619 Project, who engage in outright falsification and present a racist narrative of the origins of the US. This is the method of various layers of the upper middle class who argue that their membership in one or another racial, ethnic or gender group entitles them to a greater share of wealth. It has made *Nickel Boys* a much narrower, less effective and less illuminating movie than it could have been.



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