

Focus on society criticism and commentary

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Focus on Society / Criticism and Commentary

Focus on Society/Criticism and Comment. Discussion Focus on Society There are some films that leave a lasting impression on an audience because they bring to light new aspects of the human condition that people have not properly appreciated before. Two such films are Philadelphia (1993) and Brokeback Mountain (2005). Both of these films have aspects of homosexuality as a main theme and they present sympathetic gay male characters. The first film deals with the theme of AIDS/HIV and its consequences and in the second film, an unconventional gay relationship in the midst of a rather macho cowboy society is the key theme. Both films were regarded as controversial in conservative quarters, simply because homosexuality is a taboo subject there, provoking moral outrage, but at the same time they reflect an on-going change in American society towards a more liberal and diverse social landscape.

In Philadelphia a very reflective and atmospheric soundtrack helped to imprint in people's minds the ordinariness and humanity of gay people. The standard courtroom motif evoked earlier films which depicted a struggle for social justice, such as To Kill a Mockingbird (1962) which dealt with the civil rights struggle of African Americans in the face of overt racial prejudice. The film reflected some of the big debates of the 1990s about homosexuality and its main contribution to that debate was to add dignity and compassion to the whole subject of AIDS/HIV. In a similar manner Brokeback Mountain used the Western tradition as a familiar backdrop to a controversial relationship, thus, for some, normalizing and integrating gay relationships into American cultural history. Both films present positive images of homosexual people,

and by creating sympathy for them within the narrative they contribute to a gradual shift of American sensibility towards less judgemental attitudes, and a more accepting culture towards homosexuality.

References

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Mulligan, R. and Pakula, A. J. (Producers) & Mulligan, R. (Director). (1962) To Kill a Mockingbird. [Motion Picture]. United States: Universal Pictures.

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Discussion 2

The review of *The Beach* (2000) by Elvis Mitchell (2000) for the *New York Times* takes a distinctly auteurist approach to the movie, since it repeatedly mentions the connections between this movie and other works by director Danny Boyle. An obvious connection with Boyle's famous film *Trainspotting* (1996) is stressed at the beginning of the review in an appreciation of actor Robert Carlyle, who also starred in that earlier film, and indeed played a similarly deranged and drug-fuelled character in both films.

Boyle's "sleight of hand camera business" (Mitchell, 2000) is interpreted as a substitute for narrative resonance, and the point is reinforced with reference to the "gleeful and malicious piece of legerdemain" that was observed in the director/producer team's debut film *Shallow Grave* (1994).

The main point of the review is to highlight the career track of the Boyle/Macdonald collaborative team and point out how they consistently

undermine genre boundaries with subversive and sudden shifts in tone “slipping from cheeky to dread in the same shot” (Mitchell, 2000). Evidence for these assertions is drawn from the camera work, especially the brooding interiors. Further evidence of continuity in Boyle’s directorial style is found in an inability to fully reflect the magnificence of the natural land, sea and sky which the reviewer considers was present also in Boyle’s film *A Life Less Ordinary* (1997).

The review acknowledges the popularity of actor Leonardo di Caprio with reference to “his young fan club” (Mitchell, 2000) and a comic hint at their immaturity with reference to their wearing of retainers which is a typical routine for many American children and teenagers. The words that most aptly sum up the reviewer’s attitude are “director’s savvy” (Mitchell, 2000) which is at the same time an appreciation of Boyle’s technical skill, and an implied criticism of his lack of narrative substance.

Note: When it comes to sources which I use when evaluating whether or not I will see a movie, I often prefer not to see any reviews about new movies, and just go by the trailers and advertisements, viewing whatever looks interesting at the time. For older movies, I read reviews on the Rotten Tomatoes or similar websites, or sometimes I do a search on the film title and read whatever comes up.

References

Macdonald, A. (Producer) & Boyle, D. (Director). (1995). *Shallow Grave*. [Motion Picture]. UK: Film4.

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Mitchell, E. (2000) Movie Review: The Beach. New York Times . February 11th. Retrieved from: <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9C00EFDE103EF932A25751C0A9669C8B63&ner=Rotten%20Tomatoes>

Appendix: Text of Review by Elvis Mitchell.

MOVIE REVIEW

The Beach (2000)

FILM REVIEW; DiCaprio Swims With the Plankton in Paradise

By ELVIS MITCHELL

Published: February 11, 2000

The Beach is an attempt by all the major talents involved to try something new. For the first 10 minutes, the movie slices forward like the prelims of the latest adrenaline splurge at the Extreme Games.

It reaches an early peak when Robert Carlyle -- the flesh-and-blood yang to the yin flash of the director, Danny Boyle -- pops up as Daffy, a buzz-cut head offering words of wisdom to Richard (Leonardo DiCaprio). Playing to the back row, Mr. Carlyle is so potent a presence that hes one of the few actors for whom Dolby Digital is wholly unnecessary. Daffy tells Richard about an island paradise not found on any conventional map. And Richard, a young American vacationing in Thailand and looking for something off the beaten path, follows Daffys map in search of promise.

Mr. Boyle is as skilled as any filmmaker at polished sleight-of-hand camera

business, in lieu of narrative resonance. Mr. DiCaprio wants to stand his image on its head and give the members of his young fan club something to think about as they slip on their retainers and doze off with visions of Leo dancing in their heads. The picture opens with stark black-and-white that blinks into color before you know it: a metaphor for the awakening that Richard will undergo.

Like every tourist, you want it all . . . to be safe, just like America, a Thai street salesman sneers at Richard as he drifts from one noisy, overcrowded bazaar to another. Seconds later, Richard is forcing down several jiggers of snake blood to prove hes down for new experiences.

Richard lures his next-door neighbors from his hostel (Virginie Ledoyen and Guillaume Canet) into joining him on the trip to the Shangri-La that Daffy told him about. After a boys book of adventure journey, they find themselves in the hidden land. (That is, after they slip past acres of apparently wild marijuana that is actually fiercely guarded by drug runners.) There, Richard is knee-deep in pleasure seekers who have established a commune in this hidden land -- more sun, willowy babes and lean fellas with six-pack abs than youll find in a summer resort layout in the fashion magazine *Spoon*.

Maybe *Shallow Grave*, a gleeful and malicious piece of genre legerdemain, was an appropriate first feature from The Beach production team: Mr. Boyle, the writer John Hodge and the producer Andrew MacDonald. Theyre best served when riffing on genres, dispensing a superficial gleam that is cool to the touch. Their crowning, and crowing, work, a glib adaptation of Irvine Welshs facile scab *Trainspotting*, contradicted the heroin-pallor of the source material; it burned with a red-eyed eight-ball rush.

With the exception of perhaps John Woo, no director is better at exploiting interiors than Mr. Boyle. In *Shallow Grave*, the apartment that was the center of most of the action was as much a character as any actor in the film. And if mottled walls could talk, they would chatter like *Trainspotting*. His camera slithered through every nook and cranny to find just the right peculiar point of view.

The camera work in *The Beach* is just as industrious. (Oddly enough, the wide open spaces and big, blue skies confound him a bit here, as they did in *A Life Less Ordinary*.) Mr. Boyle and his squad are also gifted at shifts in tone, slipping from cheeky to dread in the same shot, like a gentle freshet with a pearly froth that pours into an ominous waterfall. The camera sidles up to a monkey sitting in a tree, then closes in on the tether on its neck: its a watch-primate in service of the weed guards, and what was innocent is transformed into danger.

Mr. Boyle and his collaborators are superb at creating surface tension, and Alex Garland's novel is all surfaces, one fever dream mostly about Vietnam bleeding into the next. The book is a fervid stoners reverie about introducing an outside element into a thriving organism, and how that element becomes an infection that leads to the deterioration of a healthy organism -- the absurdity of good intentions.

But the movie is simply a *Colors* by Benetton take on *Lord of the Flies*, with the imperious paradise ruler (Tilda Swinton, whom the movie could use a lot more of) holding court as the Promised Land crashes around her. Richard finds himself living the aphorism that has ruined the life of so many film protagonists: paradise breeds callousness, a marginal rethinking of beware

of the things you want, for you shall have them.

The Beach is not a terrible movie, just an insubstantial one. All of Mr. DiCaprios charisma and the directors savvy are used to divert us from the fact that theres not much going on. The picture is a cocoon around Mr. DiCaprio. Nothing makes that more evident than the bumping, nonstop underscore, a great soundtrack, the kind of music that you would hear at Moomba or Balthazar or someplace else in Manhattan where Mr. DiCaprio would be sequestered from harm behind a velvet rope. He shows some talent: when he tries to seduce Ms. Ledoyen with rambling collegiate pomposity, it is clear hes willing to undermine his idol status and lampoon cockiness. (He has a lanky, likable intensity -- earnestness with a sense of humor.)

As undifferentiated as Mr. DiCaprio is, almost everyone else in the movie is more indistinct, with the exception of Mr. Carlyle with his World Is Not Enough haircut, Ms. Swinton and the vibrant young actor Paterson Joseph (as Keaty, a British Empire sports junkie), who establishes an immediate connection with the audience. The Beach is underwritten, so much so that it is mostly texture, like a scene that parodies love-on-the-beach sequences and then goes them one better: Mr. DiCaprio and Ms. Ledoyen kiss underwater, aglow from the iridescent plankton that surrounds them. The visual scheme, abetted by the cinematographer, Darius Khondji, is the most distinguished member of the cast.

The unstated theme of Mr. Boyle and Mr. Hodges protagonists -- well, maybe its not so unstated, after all -- is that theyre looking for something new, until they come to realize what they left behind isnt so soul-deadening after all.

Along those lines, *The Beach*, as the old joke goes, is priceless. It isn't worth anything.

The Beach is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). It includes exhibitions of the leisure life style: drugs, adult language, nudity and sex.

THE BEACH

Directed by Danny Boyle; written by John Hodge, based on the book by Alex Garland; director of photography, Darius Khondji; edited by Masahiro Hirakubo; music by Angelo Badalamenti; production designer, Andrew McAlpine; produced by Andrew MacDonald; released by 20th Century Fox. Running time: 120 minutes. This film is rated R.

WITH: Leonardo DiCaprio (Richard), Virginie Ledoyen (Francoise), Guillaume Canet (Etienne), Robert Carlyle (Daffy), Tilda Swinton (Sal) and Paterson Joseph (Keaty).