Three American films: Sadness, and less

The Limey-Three Kings-Bringing Out the Dead

By David Walsh
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_The Limey_, directed by Steven Soderbergh, written by Lem Dobbs

_Three Kings_, directed by David O. Russell, written by Russell from a story by John Ridley

_Bringing Out the Dead_, directed by Martin Scorsese, written by Paul Schrader, based on a book by Joe Connelly

More than anything else, _The Limey_ makes me sad. For a number of reasons.

In Steven Soderbergh's film, Terence Stamp plays Wilson, a British ex-convict who travels to Los Angeles to find out the truth about his daughter's suspicious death. Piecing things together, Wilson determines that the young woman's ex-lover, Terry Valentine (Peter Fonda), had a hand in her death, and single-mindedly pursues him. Valentine, a rock and roll promoter, lives in a small palace high in the Hollywood Hills, with a swimming pool that extends out into space. Wilson teams up, more or less, with two of his late daughter's friends, Ed (Luis Guzman), and her former drama coach, Elaine (Lesley Ann Warren).

Soderbergh is a talented director, who has made a number of interesting films (sex, lies, and videotape, 1989; Kafka, 1991; King of the Hill, 1993; Schizopolis, 1996). I thought his talent was largely wasted on _Out of Sight_ (1998) with George Clooney and Jennifer Lopez. I think it is wasted, to a lesser extent, on _The Limey._

The film is intelligently and attractively put together. Soderbergh has an uncanny sense for the arrangement and juxtaposition of images. And the film has some bite to it. Valentine is the most fully worked out figure: a leftover from the 1960s' "counterculture," handsome but a little long in the tooth, overextended financially, selfish, dependent on thugs. His new girlfriend tells him, "You're not specific enough to be a person, you're more like a vibe."

Soderbergh also deserves full credit for placing Terence Stamp, one of the great film actors of the past 35 years, once again in the public eye. In one scene we get to see Stamp, after a beating, slither to his feet from a prone position and into the frame as if his body were made of rubber, but with a face set like stone. He's capable of astonishing stuff—above all, intelligence.

Unfortunately, Stamp has taken Wilson more seriously than the filmmakers have. At its heart, there is not enough to his character or the film. Every relationship in _The Limey_ hinges on one that we never see or feel in any real sense, between the father and daughter. I think the script-writer has set himself an impossible task. We are asked to take on faith the emotional and psychological underpinnings of the events. The spectator may appear to be willing to go along with the pretense that their absence or weakened presence doesn't matter, but both filmmaker and spectator lose something in the bargain. No one feels as deeply as he or she should. (One asks: is the obsession with his daughter plausible? Is it "in character"?) It all remains a little brittle, a little too much on the surface. The film busies itself with secondary matters, with visual tricks and showing off, because it is a bit hollow and unconvincing at the center. Critics and audiences may be satisfied with that, but I think it's settling for far too little.

The film's associations are fascinating, however, and a little tragic. There is the matter of Stamp's life and career. Born in Stepney in the east end of London in 1939, the son of a tugmaster, Stamp appeared briefly on the stage before making a remarkable film debut in _Billy Budd_ (1962, directed by Peter Ustinov). Three years later he played the psychotically repressed kidnapper in William Wyler's _The Collector_. In the course of the following three years he appeared in Joseph Losey's _Modesty Blaise_ (1966, with Monica Vitti and Dirk Bogarde); John Schlesinger's _Far From the Madding Crowd_ (1967, with Julie Christie); Ken Loach's _Poor Cow_ (1967); Federico Fellini's episode in _Spirits of the Dead_ (1968, three stories based on Poe tales); and Pier Paolo Pasolini's _Teorema_ (1968, one of the most remarkable films of the decade).

Stamp told an interviewer from the _Village Voice_ recently: "The roles didn't completely stop [after 1970] but I had been spoiled—I'd worked with Wyler, Losey, Fellini, Pasolini. I was in negotiations with Orson Welles, I'd got accustomed to superleague. When the 60s came to a close, it went from working with the best to making rubbish.... I decided to travel. I bought a round-the-world ticket, thinking some great director would want me sometime, and until then I'll just see the world. I went everywhere. And nobody called. Ten years went by."

Fewer of the type of film Stamp had been accustomed to making were being made. One of the best actors of his generation, Stamp is probably best known to many moviegoers today for his appearances in _Superman_ and _Superman II_ as the villainous General Zod. He also has a small part in the new _Star Wars_ film. I suppose it is possible to read Wilson's pursuit of Valentine as a means by which the filmmakers have metaphorically organized Stamp's revenge on the entertainment industry. I applaud that effort.

In _The Limey_ Soderbergh introduces, as flashbacks from Wilson's earlier life, clips of Stamp in the 1967 _Poor Cow_. Loach's film, based on the novel by Nell Dunn, is about a struggling working class couple. The husband is a thief and Stamp plays his gentle best friend, Dave, with whom the wife is really in love.

The fragments from _Poor Cow_, including the concluding one in which Stamp plays the guitar and sings a verse of Donovan's _Colours_, are evocative for a whole set of reasons. It was at that time that a number of British artists and intellectuals, including Loach, were being drawn to the socialist movement. The scenes from _Poor Cow_ speak to some of the aspirations, cultural and social, of the time, aspirations which it was not possible, for a host of reasons, to realize at the time. In their own way, they hint at the tragedy of lost beauty and youth and ideals. (Much is made of the associations with Peter Fonda and _Easy Rider_. I think these are less interesting. Fonda is a far better actor today than he was in the 1960s and _Easy Rider_ was a fairly silly film.)

But there is something else about the sequences from _Poor Cow_. They show Carol White, who had the leading role. She also starred in two of Loach's better known "Wednesday Plays," _Cathy Come Home_ and _Up the
Junction, both broadcast in 1965. She was a vibrant performer, appearing in a few more films in England, White moved to Hollywood in the 1970s. She did mostly junk there, including two years of the sophomoric television series Laverne & Shirley, roles in a couple of “women-in-prison” movies and, finally, bit parts in The Witches of Eastwick (1987), as “Cashier,” The Fabulous Baker Boys (1989), as “Bad Singer,” and Grand Canyon (1991), as “Morning Nurse.”

A commentator discreetly observes, “Her career wavered, as did her private life...” On September 16, 1991, White was found “hanging from a tree. A note was found.” Genuine tragedy.

I don't know to what extent Soderbergh was conscious of all these associations. In any event, he is someone with the sort of artistic temperament that makes it possible for them to emerge. I remain convinced that he will do something important again.

Three Kings is a film about the Persian Gulf War. Four US soldiers, three enlisted men and an officer, set off after the official end of the war to steal gold that the Iraqi government has looted from Kuwait. In the course of their raid they come upon political opponents of the Saddam Hussein regime. These oppositionists have been abandoned by the US forces; the gold or help the oppressed Iraqis?

David O. Russell directed Three Kings. He previously made Spanking the Monkey (1994), in which incest between mother and son was the most memorable feature, and Flirting with Disaster (1996), an occasionally amusing, but somewhat overrated comedy with Ben Stiller, Patricia Arquette and Téa Leoni.

All three films indicate a desire on the director's part to be thought “offbeat.” Three Kings is full of black comedy, chaotic and unlikely happenstance, and a certain anti-establishment coloring. Unfortunately, however, Russell's film belongs to the category of works that might be characterized under the heading of Conformist Non-conformism (from Jerry Maguire to American Beauty). That is to say, films that have their little joke at the expense of the status quo while accepting its more fundamental premises.

Russell takes a few swipes at the military and the media (although these are pretty insipid; he suggests that oil might have been a motive in the war with Iraq; he notes that the US once armed Hussein; he criticizes the Bush administration, as indicated above, for abandoning the Iraqi opposition.)

But this all takes place within the framework of the acceptance, more or less, of the notion that the US is the legitimate liberator of the earth's people. The four Americans are still charged, when all is said and done, with a jazzed-up and somewhat disorderly version of the White Man's Burden. Indeed the film might raise in some minds the possibility that the American military should have marched on Baghdad and helped establish Iraqi “democracy.” It's really awful how shallow political conceptions are in these circles. How and when is that going to change?

In any event, Russell shows some talent and some ingenuity. The acting is fine. Mark Wahlberg continues to be impressive; Ice Cube too. Spike Jonze, when he doesn't lay it on a little thick, is remarkable as a kid from Texas who has a lot to learn. George Clooney is fine too within the limits he or someone has set, i.e., that he must play a character firmly in command at all times.

In Martin Scorsese's Bringing Out the Dead Frank Pierce (Nicolas Cage) is a paramedic at work on mid-Manhattan's west side. As part of his job he tends to junkies, prostitutes, the homeless, the old and sick, the dying. Pierce and his partners patrol the filthy streets at night, climbing tenement stairs, navigating alleyways. At the hospital patients choke the corridors. All in all, one tragedy and horror after another.

The film covers three days. Frank has begun to see ghosts, specters of patients he's lost on the street. In particular, a young prostitute. He is on the verge of a nervous breakdown. In fact, everyone's going crazy. Frank

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