

Mistaken identity

The Talented Mr. Ripley, written and directed by Anthony Minghella, based on the novel by Patricia Highsmith

By David Walsh
31 December 1999

A young American is the central figure in Anthony Minghella's new film, set in the late 1950s. As the result of a mix-up about a university blazer, Tom Ripley (Matt Damon), working as a washroom attendant in New York City, receives a lucrative commission: to fetch businessman Herbert Greenleaf's wayward son, Dickie, back from his Italian idyll. Tom travels to Italy and falls in with Dickie (Jude Law) and his girl friend, Marge Sherwood (Gwyneth Paltrow). He is attracted to Dickie's wealth and lifestyle, and his person. When Dickie eventually tires of him and threatens to end their relations, Ripley murders him and assumes his identity. More killings are required to prevent the police from figuring out the guilty party.

The Talented Mr. Ripley left me so cold and uninvolved I find it difficult to write about. The film purports to be about social difference, class envy and the explosive consequences of repressing one's sexual impulses. It seemed to me bloated and dull, one of those works that wants to have it both ways: the director places attractive stars in picturesque settings to insure success at the box office and his own career advancement, and then claims to be addressing complex and even painful subjects. I sense artistic opportunism and intellectual muddiness.

The film touches upon certain things. After he's been mistaken for one of Dickie's Princeton chums, Tom is told by the family chauffeur, "the Greenleaf name opens a lot of doors." His first experience with pretending to be Dickie brings him instantly into contact with a bored rich young woman, Meredith Logue (Cate Blanchett), who treats him as one of her own kind. Ripley gets a taste of the good life in Italy, and wants to keep on tasting it. He says at one point, "I always thought it would be better to be a fake somebody than a real nobody."

Then there is the question of Ripley's sexuality. Self-hating and ashamed, he stumbles about in his desire

for Dickie. Empty and absent to himself, Ripley doesn't merely want to possess the object of his affection, he wants to *be* him. If Dickie were to inhabit his body than he would be somebody in the literal sense, perhaps for the first time.

But all this remains on the level of ideas or images thrown out, without commitment or passion. None of it is deeply felt. This is not what spectators will take away with them. This is another film at the end of which, more than anything else, people will wish they were beautiful and famous, and celebrities like the actors on the screen. It will not make them think or feel deeply about the rich, or America, or their own lives. It's all an imitation of art and life. To someone navigating an ocean of junk, of course, such films may be mistaken for serious work.

The Talented Mr. Ripley is neither fish nor fowl. It is not well-paced and concise enough to work as a thriller; it doesn't possess the depth of a serious social or psychological analysis. It just sits there, self-important and essentially hollow.

Spontaneity in the film, such as it is, is provided by Jude Law as Greenleaf and Philip Seymour Hoffman as his snobbish, parasitical friend. With the other actors, Gwyneth Paltrow in particular, one can see and hear the gears clicking.

Patricia Highsmith, whose 1955 novel Minghella adapted, has a considerable following, particularly in Europe. Born in Texas and raised in New York City, Highsmith spent most of her life as an expatriate. Her first novel, *Strangers on a Train* (1950), was made into a remarkable film by Alfred Hitchcock in 1951; it has subsequently formed the basis of several bad films, including the execrable *Throw Momma From the Train* (1987).

The French director René Clément made a relatively turgid version of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, *Plein Soleil*

(English-language title *Purple Noon*), with and Maurice Ronet, in 1960. Ripley appeared as a character (played by Dennis Hopper) in Wim Wenders' *The American Friend* (1977), although the film is based on two other (of the five) books in which he shows up.

Some twenty or more theatrical or television films have been made based on Highsmith's works, almost exclusively in France and Germany. Directors as disparate as Claude Chabrol, Claude Autant-Lara, Michel Deville, Mai Zetterling and Samuel Fuller (who filmed one of her stories for French television in 1990) have been attracted to the material.

Highsmith was a talented writer. She generally wrote about people carrying a considerable burden of guilt or shame. They often find themselves in a position where, through no fault of their own, they're thought to have committed a crime. A husband and wife, for example, are having difficulties. He may even harbor murderous thoughts. All of a sudden his wife takes off, without a word to anyone. Family and neighbors, and eventually the police, begin to suspect he's murdered her. He has no way to defend himself, because the woman remains out of touch. In the end, she commits suicide or is pushed off a cliff by her lover. The husband induces the guilt-stricken man to take enough sedatives to kill himself with. He gets off scot-free, except that he has to go on living. (*A Suspension of Mercy*)

Highsmith wrote efficiently and accurately, with a style that owed something to American hard-boiled detective writing and something to the French New Novelists and existentialists. Her characters exist in a godless universe where everyone makes up his or her own morality. "I rather like criminals and find them extremely interesting," she wrote. "I find the public passion for justice quite boring and artificial, for neither life nor nature cares if justice is ever done or not."

In her writing one certainly senses a specific, somewhat misanthropic response to the postwar world and to the stifling social and sexual conformism of postwar America in particular. Ripley is more than anything else a kind of sexual transgressor. In the final novel in which he appears (*Ripley Under Water*), Ripley is reading Richard Ellmann's biography of Oscar Wilde: "Something about Oscar's life ... was like a purge, man's fate encapsulated; a man of goodwill, of talent, whose gifts to human pleasure remained considerable, had been attacked and brought low by the vindictiveness of the *hoi polloi*, who had taken sadistic pleasure in watching Oscar brought low. His story reminded Tom of that of Christ, a man of generous

goodwill, with a vision of expanding consciousness, of increasing the joy of life." In Highsmith, Ripley is the anti-Wilde, the anti-Christ; he is not going to take it all lying down. His murders are essentially revenge killings.

(*Ripley Under Water*, interestingly, is dedicated "To the dead and the dying among the Intifadeh and the Kurds, to those who fight oppression in whatever land, and stand up not only to be counted but to be shot.")

The names in *The Talented Mr. Ripley* are suggestive. Greenleaf, Sherwood [as in the Forest] suggest Nature, wholeness, something with a right to exist on earth. Ripley, at least to an American eye and ear, suggests a conman ["Ripley's Believe It or Not"], perhaps an artist, as well as something torn, not whole. Nature versus Artifice: another theme of Wilde's. The handsome Dickie Greenleaf brings to mind one of the latter's protagonists, Dorian Gray, and not only because of the common initials.

In my view, however, it is also possible to overrate Highsmith. Her response to reality is a limited one and her notion of transgression somewhat shallow. The language and drama are not rich and suggestive enough; they raise thorny problems but resolve them too easily. Reading one of her books is "like a purge." They are best thought of as thrillers. The proof is that one reads a Highsmith novel, forgets its details and can read it again in six months. The dread her books evoke never goes beyond the immediate circumstances of the central characters; shame and fear never become "world-historical" issues.

In any event, there is something to Highsmith. This is more than one can say, in my opinion, of Minghella's film based on her book.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>