

Three recent films

Autumn in New York, directed by Joan Chen, Space Cowboys, directed by Clint Eastwood, Gladiator, directed by Ridley Scott

By David Walsh
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I recall an interview with American actor Richard Gere televised early in the 1980s, probably between his roles in *American Gigolo* (1980) and *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982), in which he discussed his hope of working in the near future with German directors Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Werner Herzog. He spoke somewhat self-importantly about it, but at least the desire existed in him to do something meaningful.

Two dozen or so mostly lousy films, one “supermodel” ex-wife and 20 years of self-satisfaction and prosperity later, Gere now graces *Autumn in New York*. It's not his fault of course that Fassbinder's life came to a shattering end in 1982 or that Herzog more or less went off the rails. Or that a generally reactionary climate came to prevail in the 1980s, which would have consequences for cinema. Nor can Gere be blamed for the generally miserable level of contemporary filmmaking and the lack of substantial acting roles. He's not responsible for any of that, but are there any signs of his having put up much of a struggle?

Gere, born in 1949, is in some ways typical of his generation. He was involved at the University of Massachusetts with the radical Students for a Democratic Society and anti-Vietnam War protest. After dropping out, he pursued a stage and film acting career, first coming to prominence in *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (1977) and *Days of Heaven* (1978). In the 1980s he identified himself with opposition to US government policies in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala.

The collapse of the protest movement milieu, the general enrichment of those who composed it and the drift of the latter away from radical opposition to American society are intertwined and complex

processes. The working out of these processes takes quite individual forms.

Gere, a philosophy major in university, became a practicing Buddhist 20 years ago and now counts the Dalai Lama among his friends. He has been identified with the cause of Tibetan independence for a decade. In 1993 he took the opportunity of the Academy Awards to denounce the Chinese government for its invasion and continued occupation of Tibet. The policies of the Beijing Stalinists have been heavy-handed and brutal and would repulse anyone with a conscience, but political knowledge and perspective are also helpful. The program of Tibetan independence and restoration of the feudalist Dalai Lama has brought Gere shoulder-to-shoulder with the US State Department, the CIA and extreme right-wing elements. [See: The tawdry politics of Tibetan Buddhism: The flight of the Karmapa Lama from Tibet]

In 1999, in the aftermath of the US-led NATO campaign against Serbia, Gere visited camps housing ethnic Albanian refugees in Macedonia. One gets the general, not so unusual picture: intellectual superficiality, self-indulgence and disorientation.

In *Autumn in New York*, directed by Chinese-born actress Joan Chen, Gere plays a philandering millionaire restaurateur in Manhattan who falls for the much younger Winona Ryder, a woman—the daughter of an old semi-flame—dying of some heart ailment. Gere's character finds it difficult at first to commit himself to the relationship, but after first betraying and walking out on the young woman, throws himself into the affair and does everything in his power to save her life.

I don't object to melodrama, and the story of love in

the shadow of death is an entirely legitimate subject, but this is poorly and unconvincingly done. I don't remember the silly *Love Story* (1970) very well, with Ryan O'Neal and Ali MacGraw, but I have a feeling it had a little more going for it than this effort.

Much of the film is composed of picture postcard shots of the Manhattan skyline and golden-leaved trees in Central Park. Later, there's snow, and death. The characters all have lots of money and time on their hands. They don't seem to be comfortable with each other, any more than we are with them. Nothing on screen persuades me that the leading figures know or care much about one another. I suppose in its own way this is a form of Realism, since the wealthier sections of New York City's population at present are about as impervious to genuine human feeling as they come.

I was alarmed when I read that Winona Ryder was in this film. I fear for her soul a little. Her more charming and truthful expressions and gestures, if she's not careful, will turn into mere tricks, forms of manipulation, quite external to her inner being. At that moment, an actor leaves the land of the living. There are other talented performers at work here: Anthony LaPaglia, Elaine Stritch and a remarkable newcomer, Vera Farmiga. As for Gere, his performances now have only slightly more spontaneity than those of the two leading presidential candidates. The film has a handful of recognizably human moments, but not more than that.

Over the course of directing 22 films Clint Eastwood has known more artistic failure than success. He seems most adept at representing a certain kind of male personality under pressure, in *Play Misty for Me* and *True Crime*, for example. Certain of his Westerns have also had their appeal. Unfortunately, there appear to be more things he can't do than he can. It's not clear, aside from some sense of the crisis that individuals of his age and background find themselves in, that he has any strong ideas or themes to present to the public, certainly fewer than the two directors who must have influenced his early work, Sergio Leone and Don Siegel. His is not a critical or an entirely conformist voice, it's simply a voice.

Space Cowboys is a flat and largely unaffffecting effort. It tells the unlikely story of four Air Force pilots and crewmen, deprived in the late 1950s of the possibility of going into space by the establishment of

NASA, sent 40 years later to repair a Russian satellite that is threatening to drop from the sky. We learn all we need to know about the film's principal concerns in the first ten minutes or so.

Its attitude toward middle and old age is surprisingly mean-spirited. Eastwood and the others, Tommy Lee Jones, Donald Sutherland and James Garner, put up with a good deal of abuse to no particular end. *Space Cowboys* purports to be a tribute to the continuing powers of those over the age of 50, but it consistently plays to the real or imagined prejudices of the much younger age group that interests Hollywood market researchers and executives.

Jones's condition is at a less-developed stage than Gere's, but he is in danger too of transforming his art into mere going through the motions. Compare his performance here with the one he gave in *Coal Miner's Daughter* in 1980.

Gladiator, directed by Ridley Scott, is enjoyable, as long as it's not taken too seriously. Russell Crowe plays a Roman general, Maximus, the favorite of a dying Emperor Marcus Aurelius. The unfortunate Maximus is laid low by Marcus Aurelius' jealous son and successor, Commodus, and reduced to the status of a slave. He makes his way back to a largely computer-generated Rome as a gladiator and manages to position himself to wreak revenge on Commodus, who has had his wife and son murdered. Everything is quite improbable, but professionally done and played to the hilt.

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