

The loss of objectivity

Storytelling, written and directed by Todd Solondz

By David Walsh
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Todd Solondz, the director of *Welcome to the Dollhouse* and *Happiness*, has made a new film, *Storytelling*. Solondz specializes in the investigation of states of American suburban despair and alienation. Given to the treatment of severe and often quite anti-social behavior (rape or threats of rape, pedophilia, murder), the filmmaker has attracted a good deal of attention. Solondz has ardent admirers and fierce detractors. It might be best to avoid both camps in order to make sense of his work.

After seeing *Happiness* at the 1998 Toronto film festival, I wrote:

“One disappointment this year was Todd Solondz’s *Happiness*. I thought his *Welcome to the Dollhouse* dealt sympathetically with the plight of a young girl growing up in New Jersey’s direst suburbs. The new film, despite Solondz’s stated intention ‘to put on film certain characters that might be normally deemed repugnant or freakish, and to somehow whittle away at those surfaces, so that the audience could sympathize with the unsympathetic and see that there was a richness of life there,’ simply tempts an audience to laugh condescendingly and complacently at his cast of unfortunates. One of the director’s most unforgivable decisions was to turn the suicide of a minor character, rejected in love, into an opportunity to snigger at this ‘loser.’ Such moments reminded me of the comment of a genuinely—and not fashionably—compassionate filmmaker, the late German director R.W. Fassbinder, in response to an interviewer’s suggestion that a scene in one of his early films, in which a chambermaid kills herself, had a comic effect: ‘I’m against caricatures, I’m against parodies ... if you say that this scene has the effect of a parody, then I have to take your word for it, but then I’m ashamed of myself and I apologize.’”

I would say that after a viewing of *Storytelling*, in which contempt and compassion uneasily commingle, this comment needs some adjustment. Or, to put it another way, Solondz’s difficulty seems a larger and more objective one. One is obliged to ask: how is it possible that an artist of some intelligence and sensitivity should be so inconsistent in his attitude toward his own creations and beyond them, his fellow creatures?

Storytelling has two parts. In the first, “Fiction,” set in the 1980s, a white college student, Vi (Selma Blair), breaks up with her cerebral palsy-afflicted boyfriend and becomes involved with her black writing teacher, Mr. Scott (Robert Wisdom), a Pulitzer Prize winner. The latter turns out to be a sadist and a swine and the girl ends up in a degrading sexual situation, which she then turns into a short story for her class. The teacher calls her “callow yet coy,” but acknowledges that the story is an advance on her previous work. “At least,” he says, “it has a beginning, a middle and an end.” (In order to get an “R” rating in the US, Solondz was obliged to censor his own sex scene. Vi

and Mr. Scott are covered by a prominent red box.)

In the film’s second and longer story, “Nonfiction,” an aspiring documentary filmmaker, more or less by accident, ends up chronicling the lives of a suburban family, the Livingstons. Scooby (Mark Webber), the family’s oldest son, is the central figure in the work. Uninspired and unmotivated, Scooby’s ambition is to be a “sidekick” on a late-night talk show or perhaps the host of his own show. His only interest is in becoming famous, one way or another. The director, Toby Oxman (Paul Giamatti), veers between feelings of superiority and sympathy for the family members. When his editor (Franka Potente of *Run Lola Run*) muses out loud that the footage tends to turn the Livingstons into caricatures, Oxman protests, “I love them.” The evidence suggests otherwise. Scooby ultimately wanders into a public screening of the material and hears the audience roaring with laughter. In a subplot the Livingstons’ youngest son, Mikey, unintentionally harasses the family’s Salvadoran maid and eventually brings about her dismissal. She, in turn, exacts revenge.

There are a number of sharp portrayals and biting comments in *Storytelling*, the majority of them, unfortunately, undermined by Solondz’s inconsistent and occasionally quite disturbing handling of his material. There is something extraordinarily true to life about Vi, the middle class college girl with a “Biko Lives” T-shirt, an obvious supporter of all the right causes. When her handicapped boyfriend drops her unceremoniously, she wails, “I thought he would be different! He has CP!” A wonderful moment (and Blair is excellent).

However, the entire sequence is largely ruined by the violent and pornographic conclusion, which takes us far afield. The logic is skewed. After all, not everyone who indulges in Vi’s fascination with the downtrodden ends up in such a predicament. What does the abusive sex have to do with the point being made, or, rather, not being made? Solondz starts out by depicting someone with a well-meaning, but rather sophomoric social view and ends up making her the victim, more or less, of a sexual predator. Does one inevitably lead to the other? If so, definite and, frankly, reactionary political conclusions flow from this. If not, then what *is* the argument? One is not much farther at that point than a *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*.

Whether he intended to or not, Solondz has wildly sensationalized (and made that much more difficult to consider rationally) a legitimate psychological and social situation. One feels that he has done this, in the final analysis, because he has less than a clear understanding himself of the issues involved. In any event, he has shied away from truly working out their implications. The sex scene is a short-cut. While it may win him laurels as a clear-eyed, unsentimental sexual pioneer, he has, in my view, taken the line of least resistance. The net result is that no one could possibly be clarified by the sequence.

The second part of the film has its moments, but it suffers from Solondz's apparently irresistible urge to mock. Scooby's parents (John Goodman and Julie Haggerty) are caricatures, amusing at moments, but rarely showing a sign of real life. The middle son, a football player, and his friends are simply jeered at. Indeed the boy is rewarded by suffering a sports injury and dying, with little sympathy from the film director. His coma is largely an opportunity for or at least a background to mirth.

Solondz has a sharp eye for some of the worst features of American society: hypocrisy, greed, the insatiable hunger for celebrity. He even touches upon class questions. The relationship of Mikey, the youngest son, to the maid, Consuelo, is worth considering. The boy is well meaning, but he has been brought up in privilege and finds Consuelo's poverty and family difficulties simply impossible to grasp. When he spills juice one night he inevitably goes to find the maid and have her mop it up. No matter that he finds her sobbing, because of a personal tragedy; he still insists that she clean up his mess.

In an interview, Solondz commented: "Mikey's emblematic of the moral vacuum in which he grew up.... Ironically he's the only one who looks at Consuelo as anything other than a functionary, and tries to engage with her, to understand and explore who she is. But he has this language that's just this dagger that digs deeper and deeper with every word that he tries to get closer, it just hurts more and more. He spills grape juice; people might be horrified, but he's behaving as he's been told to behave. It's not his role to go and clean up, it's Consuelo's role, and so it only seems natural he should ask her to do that. If she's lazy, she should be fired; there's no vindictiveness."

This is perceptive. Solondz also takes shots at *American Beauty*, the cult of *Schindler's List* and a variety of middle class cultural sacred cows. One feels that there is something healthy in his instinctive ability to cut through cant, including the "politically correct" variety. One feels this way, that is, until Solondz takes his next grotesque misstep.

After a viewing of *Happiness*, I was tempted to write the director off as a charlatan, a faddishly cynical artist. In fact, this doesn't seem to be the case. When he says of his films, "I call them sad comedies, comedies that some people might not find funny, at all, and others might find to have too much humor. When something is funny, there is something revelatory, there is something forbidden. You feel you're questioning and getting at a truth that underlies a taboo," I tend to take him at face value. Or when he asserts, "I try to approach things as truthfully as I can, to wipe away certain prejudices and comforting self-deceptions."

These are worthy sentiments. And yet the films themselves quite often convey just the opposite: contempt, an air of petty bourgeois superiority and snobbery. As one critic noted, correctly, I believe: "The problem is that Solondz's own depiction of the Livingstons isn't *that* much more nuanced or filled-in than Toby's." How can there be such a divide between the work that Solondz believes he is creating and the experience for the spectator that he actually produces?

Much of the problem seems bound up with the assault on the concept of objectivity in artistic work in recent years and its consequences. When another film critic suggests that *Storytelling* argues for "the inevitable tendency of narrative to distort, exploit and wound," I'm afraid he may be right. Both parts of the film dwell on a process of mutual exploitation between artist and subject, or artist and fellow artist. *Storytelling*, in the film, seems largely to be a weapon,

an act of retribution, a means of "getting even," even a kind of cruelty. Everyone is using others and getting used. Solondz takes the opportunity himself to respond to some of his critics, although in a relatively restrained and conscious manner.

Of course, a great deal of this mutual exploitation and manipulation goes on, particularly in the largely corrupt and banal film, television and music industries in America today; but this hardly goes under the heading of news. Is that all there is, however, to art and the art of storytelling? If all narrative is suspect, then why should we trust Solondz's film? He would probably answer, "You needn't, you shouldn't," but that simply begs the question. Why engage in artistic efforts at all if they are essentially futile and self-defeating and devoid of truth?

It is said that Solondz had a difficult adolescence, in suburbia. He is not alone in that misfortune. Dickens, I believe, also had a few difficulties growing up. Missing in Solondz is the necessary mediation, the genuinely universalizing and objective tendency, which would mean, first of all, providing himself with an historical and social conception. It is the absence of such a conception that makes it so difficult for him to adopt a consistent attitude toward his characters. He is a swimmer with no apparent sense of the broader current. At times he swims against the stream, quite bravely and honestly; at other moments he goes "with the flow," reinforcing popular prejudices and even backwardness. And he seems to have no idea when or whether or why he is doing one or the other.

Whatever its point of departure in the individual, art is one of the means by which human beings collectively gain their bearings and make sense of reality, ultimately, bring more and more of it under their conscious control. It is the subjectivism of *Storytelling* that is so grating and so limiting.

In the final analysis, all aspects of the work are affected. It is not simply that *Storytelling* exhibits ambiguities or a divided soul. There is something slight (and vindictive) about Solondz's choice of subjects. In the America of 2002, are the foibles and vulgarities of a middle class New Jersey family (not, accidentally, the perennial object of scorn of every "hip" resident of Manhattan) the most appropriate targets for ridicule? Is this all there is to satirize? One feels that Solondz is carrying out some personal vendetta that he has still not entirely been able to go beyond. It is questionable whether anything enduring will come from such a project.

A third observer calls Solondz an "unsparing social critic" No, he is hardly that. His detractors reject his harshness (potentially, a great strength), while his admirers ignore his lack of consistency and objectivity (a great weakness)—neither camp is doing him any favors.

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