

Black Snake Moan and Zodiac: No diamonds in the rough

By Joanne Laurier
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Black Snake Moan, written and directed by Craig Brewer; *Zodiac*, directed by David Fincher, screenplay by James Vanderbilt, based on the books by Robert Graysmith

Video footage of blues legend Son House opens Craig Brewer's new movie *Black Snake Moan*. The tone and theme are set when House tells the camera: "There's only one kind of blues...between male and female." Brewer, an American independent filmmaker, came to prominence in 2005 with his second work, *Hustle & Flow*.

Lazarus (Samuel L. Jackson), a broken-down blues guitarist known in his small Tennessee town for once shaking up the local honky-tonk, raises vegetables on a ramshackle farm. A bitter, God-fearing middle-aged black man, he is scarred by the departure of an errant wife who tired of a bare-bones life.

Things change when he finds a half-naked white girl on the road, unconscious from a beating. As he stabilizes her, he learns that Rae (Christina Ricci) has a sexual disorder stemming from childhood abuse. She has been binging on sex and drugs since her boyfriend Ronnie (Justin Timberlake) shipped off to army boot camp in an attempt to overcome their dead-end existence. Ronnie himself suffers from a case of extreme anxiety, which eventually gets him discharged from the service.

With misogyny in his heart and Bible in hand, Lazarus decides to exorcise the demons in Rae. It begins by chaining her to a radiator! In the end, the revival of Lazarus's musical roots proves the proper medicine to soothe all the savage and ravaged breasts—his own, Rae's and Ronnie's.

Black Snake Moan is only partially rescued from an implausible script that spouts a hollow religiosity by some flair and dynamism. The film is named after and draws energy from the "most haunting, wicked blues song of all times" by Blind Lemon Jefferson, who wrote the ballad about going blind.

"It proved the perfect metaphor," says director Brewer, "for a pivotal scene in the film. There is a moment in the movie when Lazarus and Rae are confronting their darkest secrets. Locked in a house in the country with no one around you and the right amount of thunderstorms on your back and moonshine in your mug, you're going to tap into something really primal."

Although the town's inhabitants live in extreme poverty and backwardness, in no way does the film connect their impulses or states of mind to this reality. Psychological and physical traumas seem arbitrary. A bad childhood or bad marriage just happens. Facile prescriptions follow, while emotional steadiness and good

relationships emerge from faith-based good will and a lot of playing and listening to the blues.

Brewer sees the suffering in people, and genuinely empathizes with them, but attributes its cause to the emotionally primal—"the moan of love's torment." This is compatible with the biblical references: Lazarus the resurrector (and resurrected), Rae the serpentine temptress. All of which too easily suits the present official championing of religious piety and "personal responsibility."

According to the director, it all boils down to "when you start listening to the music, you feel you are listening to something that is truly at its irreducible essence: One man, one guitar and a whole lotta pain.... I'm talking about north Mississippi, blood and guts blues. This is not pretty music. This is music that comes from raw, emotional state of need."

Whence springs this raw state of need? In one interview, Brewer explains that the "South is the Mesopotamia of American music, and it all came from poverty, it all came from those collisions of race, of culture, of gender. We're a better country because of the South."

This is very confused. No doubt the South has been the birthplace of a great deal of American popular music. The latter hasn't simply emerged, however, from "poverty"—as though poverty didn't exist in every region of the country. It developed in large measure out of forms of *social resistance*—to slavery and racism, to rural poverty, to the exploitation of landowners, to the depredations of the railroad companies and other representatives of big business—by populations, black and white, with powerful musical traditions. The notion of a *struggle* against existing conditions, expressed artistically or in any other way, seems to be a closed book to Brewer, as it is to many contemporary filmmakers.

Black Snake Moan shows poverty; it shows a young person who enlists in the military for lack of a future; it shows his peers stuck in a no-man's land engaging in self-destructive activities.

These social elements, however, are undeveloped and uncritically approached. Languishing on a primitive level, the film's characters are starved of real definition and purpose. During the course of its moralizing, *Black Snake Moan* presents a few twisted notions: with the proper intentions, holding someone captive can produce positive results and the rape of a young black boy when Rae gets the "fever" seems a legitimate rite of passage. But this is entirely in line with the notion that poverty is the source

of musical inspiration. According to the upside-down logic of this argument, opposing social misery or any other kind of suffering would be downright harmful! Clearly, the director has simply not thought these things through.

Brewer is simultaneously drawn to and repulsed by violence and aggression. He is leery of certain consequences, yet attracted to the possibility of getting to what he views as “the core of things.” Rae’s emotional-sexual pyrotechnics blow things wide open. Unfortunately, they don’t shed much light.

Brewer indolently hangs his movie on a cultural genre—the blues—which, as he says, has complex origins. But it is a culture and a music that defy superficial usurpation. It is *Black Snake Moan*’s numerous “raw” and exploitative moments that draw the least from the waters of a deep cultural well.

Zodiac directed by David Fincher (*The Fight Club*, *Seven*) is a tightly executed film about the unsolved Zodiac serial killings in the Bay Area in the late 1960s and 1970s, focusing on the men who spent years trying to crack the case. Based on two books by one of those individuals, Robert Graysmith (played in the movie by Jake Gyllenhaal), the film begins with the 1969 shooting of one young couple and the knifing of another.

The self-named Zodiac killer starts sending letters and ciphers to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the daily newspaper where Graysmith is employed as a cartoonist. He will eventually play an instrumental role in the marathon investigation (the film is something of a marathon itself, at almost three hours). The *Chronicle*’s lead crime reporter, Paul Avery (Robert Downey Jr.), has connections to the San Francisco Police Department’s Dave Toschi (Mark Ruffalo). Toschi and his partner William Armstrong (Anthony Edwards) form the core of the team tracking the murderer.

Only when the case is cold and Avery is out of the picture does the hitherto background figure, Graysmith, jump into the fray—as an eccentric, but brilliant connector of the dots. For Avery, Toschi and Graysmith, the hunt becomes a compulsion, destroying one life and transforming those of the others. *Zodiac* implies that they are the most celebrated—and perhaps the most tormented—of the Zodiac killer’s victims. An implication that seems cavalier in light of the numerous murdered human beings. In general, the film pays little attention to the latter.

Why have an extraordinary cast (which also includes Brian Cox, John Carroll Lynch, Chloë Sevigny, Elias Koteas and Philip Baker Hall) and high production values been brought together to tell this particular story?

Zodiac makes much of its refusal to pass judgment. Rather, it belongs tiresomely to the “however warped, this is the way things are” school. It skims over bleak, even horrifying, events without any explanation. Is this the filmmakers’ attitude toward American society’s current *malaise*?

Fincher’s film presents an avalanche of empirical data. The investigators in *Zodiac* are followed like insects in a glass cage. But to what end? What’s the purpose of all this? An unhealthy atmosphere pervades the film. It manages to imply that the killer is a deviant, but then so too perhaps are the pursuers, the filmmakers and the spectators. One wants to say, “Speak for yourself.”

Obsessive conduct as it is presented in the film doesn’t

necessarily elevate consciousness or enlighten us about anything, it may rather darken and dehumanize. Nothing in life, *Zodiac* implies, for example, compares to a fixation with the chase.

Attempting to shed light on the content of obsession in *Zodiac*, Fincher told one interviewer regarding the three leading characters: “They’re sort of all pieces of who I am. Avery, the pro, says things like, ‘This guy killed only five people; more people die every year in the East Bay commute.’ He’s the tortured realist; he’d love to get involved and get broken up about stuff, but he doesn’t. And then Toschi, who thinks you have to let things go. Graysmith is the compulsive part of my personality.”

As a thing-in-itself, obsessive behavior is neither admirable nor unworthy. Everything depends on its content. However, the very use of the term suggests something blind or irrational, as opposed to the conscious pursuit of a socially or intellectually progressive goal.

Zodiac’s mindset on this score is best articulated by producer Brad Fischer in the movie’s production notes: “Fincher is able to articulate things about human behavior and emotion cinematically that make the characters and the world they inhabit so incredibly authentic. He can give the viewer that feeling, that they could be watching themselves up there, sinking down into the rabbit hole without realizing it.

“The DNA of this story had so much to do with that, with degrees of malevolent deviant behavior whether you’re talking about a serial killer or the men whose lives are drained in the pursuit of something that will probably remain just out of reach for the rest of their lives.... It’s a compulsion that exists in all of us, and it has the potential to be an incredibly destructive force.”

How helpful is this?

Fincher is talented, although perhaps not as talented as he and his admirers think he is. But a chronic condescension toward humanity looms in the film’s chilly, non-committal stance. There is no substitute for a concrete analysis of social life and holding a strong point of view. Vague, nightmarish, “obsessive” visions won’t do.

Much has happened in the world since the string of Zodiac murders. (Fincher was growing up in the Bay Area at the time of the killings.) Why revive an interest in them?

Zodiac’s self-consciously and fashionably bleak view of humanity may explain in part why the long-dormant story has been resurrected. But one also senses that the grimness is somehow the line of least resistance. In the end, for whatever combination of reasons, the filmmakers demonstrate an unwillingness or incapacity to make sense of the events.

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