

Wild and Black or White: Social problems, but the solutions?

By Joanne Laurier
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Wild, directed by Jean-Marc Vallée, screenplay by Nick Hornby; *Black or White*, written and directed by Mike Binder

Wild

Directed by Canadian-born Jean-Marc Vallée (*Dallas Buyers Club*, 2013), *Wild* is an adaptation of author Cheryl Strayed's 2012 best-selling memoir *Wild: "From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail,"* the story of Strayed's grueling 1,100-mile hike on the Pacific Crest Trail from California to Washington State in 1996.

Cheryl (Reese Witherspoon) embarks on a soul-cleansing journey after she spirals downward in the wake of the death from cancer of her beloved mother, Bobbi (Laura Dern). Intercut with scenes of Cheryl negotiating the rough terrain of deserts, mountains and forests are flashbacks of her poverty-stricken childhood, her close relationship with her mother, her eventual descent into drugs and anonymous sexual encounters that destroy her marriage.

She begins the adventure by writing an inspirational quote from Emily Dickinson in the trail's register: "If your Nerve deny you—Go above your Nerve." Weighed down by a backpack dubbed "monster" that dwarfs her small frame, Witherspoon's Cheryl is on a quest for internal purification by stripping down to the primal—food, water, proper attire and shelter against the ever-changing landscape and elements.

Her isolation ("Been to most of the places in my head I didn't want to go") nourishes her, as do her few precious books. The apparent path of liberation and redemption here involves putting herself "in the way of beauty." Occasionally nature is tough, but avoiding the unwanted attention of some of the men she meets along the way is as tough, or tougher. Undeterred by the numerous challenges, Cheryl pushes on to a soundtrack featuring tunes from The Shangri-Las, Simon & Garfunkel

("Homeward Bound"), Leonard Cohen, among others. Figuratively and emotionally, she is finding her "own way out of the woods."

Vallée's pedestrian movie is partially rescued by the performances of Witherspoon and Dern, but only partially. And both the natural—and social—landscapes, as visually dominant as they are, take a back seat in *Wild*'s cramped and circumscribed narrative, focused almost exclusively on the self-realization of its protagonist.

Individuals taking extreme measures to solve their socially rooted problems is also the theme of Vallée's *Dallas Buyers Club* in which the lead character, Ron, takes on the medical authorities single-handedly. However, given the subject matter of that earlier work, the AIDS tragedy in the US, which included the strong element of government indifference and neglect, broader issues necessarily intruded far more forcefully than in *Wild*. *Dallas Buyers Club* was simply a more substantive and moving film. In *Wild*, references to poverty, drugs and social dysfunction are little more than window dressing and a plot device.

In neither film, however, does Vallée probe human suffering to its source in the structure of contemporary society, much less envision an alternative. Presumably overwhelmed by the challenge of painting a "big picture," the director narrows his lens to accommodate the trite notion of personal responsibility.

In an interview, the director states that "I guess I like underdogs. They don't have it easy and I relate to that. They're rebellious and they're trying to find their voice and their way in the world. They're trying to be happy and they're trying to find peace."

Fine, but it all adds up to something pretty tame when looked at with any seriousness. Each film takes on an intense situation—in *Dallas Buyers Club* Ron has 30 days to live and in *Wild* Cheryl embarks on a 1,100 mile trek, and treats it with a dose of flair that, in the end, largely

serves to conceal the banal theme: *Pull yourself* meaningful way into Rowena's life. In shortcutting character development, the filmmakers reduce the majority of the black characters to stereotypes.

your own bootstraps! And harsh contemporary social realities result in this unpleasant addition: *Because no one else is going to help you!*

Unwittingly or not, Vallée's contribution, as a relative Hollywood "outsider" (like some of his Mexican counterparts), is to infuse these inadequate and worse conceptions with a bit more drama and tour de force.

Black or White

In Detroit filmmaker Mike Binder's *Black or White*, an affluent, Santa Monica, California attorney, whose wife has recently died, fights to maintain custody of his seven-year-old biracial granddaughter against the efforts of her black paternal grandmother.

Elliot (Kevin Costner), devastated by the death of his wife Carol (Jennifer Ehle, underused as a ghostly apparition in a few scenes), drinks heavily and adores his granddaughter Eloise (a charming Jillian Estell), whom he sends to the best private school in the Los Angeles area. He even hires a super-talented math tutor (Mpho Koaho), a West African whose family was massacred in his native country. The young man has such an incredible range of skills and accomplishments that Elliot asks him: "Tell me what planet you're really from."

Eloise's black grandmother, the jovial and entrepreneurial Rowena (Octavia Spencer), wants to play a larger role in Eloise's life. Elliot resists the request because Eloise's absentee father, Reggie (André Holland), Rowena's son, is a drug addict with a rap sheet. He was 23 when he impregnated Elliot's 17-year-old daughter, who died in childbirth. Rowena's Ivy League-educated lawyer, her nephew Jeremiah (Anthony Mackie), believes that painting Elliot as a racist is the best strategy for winning the custody battle.

In the ensuing conflict none of the players, including Reggie, is precisely an angel or a devil. Unfortunately, they are not convincing and complex human beings either, but rather stock characters in a stodgy, predictable melodrama. As much as the movie tries to draw equal signs between the families' troubles, for example, between Elliot's alcoholism and Reggie's cocaine abuse, the end result is that Elliot wins primarily because of his wealth and supposed ability to provide the best of everything for Eloise. Her black family will play a supporting role, as a kind of entertaining background.

Furthermore, *Black or White* is firmly situated in Elliot's world and, whatever the latter's foibles, the filmmakers take his side, never venturing in any

meaningful way into Rowena's life. In shortcutting character development, the filmmakers reduce the majority of the black characters to stereotypes.

In a statement in the film's production notes, Binder (who directed two amusing films: *The Sex Monster* [1999] and *The Upside of Anger* [2005]) reveals that the film's story was inspired by events in his own life: he raised the biracial son of his deceased sister. However, he then goes on to claim that there is "very much a racial divide in this country...I realize it sounds cliché, but in so many instances, it seems that we continue to only see each other for how we appear on the surface instead of who we really are inside. Not too long ago, I was struck by the words of President Barack Obama on the night that he spoke publicly about the verdict in the Trayvon Martin case. He said, 'We have to figure out a way to get past this divide.'"

Leaving aside the fact that Barack Obama sanctions and presides over police violence against the working class, both black and white, as well as terror overseas against defenseless populations, Binder never bothers to probe seriously the source of racism. It is not some insurmountable product of American history, nor something built into the population. Contemporary social backwardness is deliberately whipped up by the powers that be for political purposes, to divide the working class.

Moreover, while hypocritically mouthing phrases about universal brotherhood, every section of the political establishment, including prominently Obama and the Democrats, attacks jobs, living standards and health care, creating poverty and social insecurity, the breeding ground for communal and ethnic tensions.

On the one hand, the no doubt well-intentioned Binder argues correctly that the general sensibilities of the population are not racist; on the other, in his film he adopts the media view that America is made up of comfortably off white people and "underprivileged" African Americans, and that money determines whether one has a good life or not.

All in all, his *Black or White* reveals Binder to be fairly clueless about the big issues in American life.

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