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Ranting About ‘The Help’

Burn Shit

February 11, 2012

Films about civil rights. Films ‘about racism.’ Films dealing with, ‘the issues’: Hollywood commodities, usually sitting neatly as a comfortable sub-genre of heart-warming, tear-jerker dramas or inspirational thrillers. *Crash*, (not Cronenberg’s necrophiliac horror – although it could easily be mistaken, what with all the frenzied, neurotic/psychotic/paranoiac behavior by Sandra Bullock *et al*) was a clumsy and heavy-handed study of race relations in post-11/9 America. But at least it offered *some* kind of analysis. One that went beyond a cursory, surface-level glance or a feel-good fable – even though it was a melodramatic, laboured and ultimately cold offering. This is more than can be said for, Tate Taylor’s, *The Help*.

Contender for the most racist film since *Triumph of the Will*, but without Leni Riefenstahl’s visionary cinematography. Excuse the hyperbolic provocations, but *The Help* makes us want to introduce the director’s smug fuckface to a flying brick. The story of a white saviour; an ambitious, go-getting journalist, Eugenia ‘Skeeter’ Phelan, on a personal crusade to liberate the subservient and docile black maids of Jackson, Mississippi (whilst simultaneously gaining a handsome journalistic reputation in the process).

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Billed as a sort of inspirational, ‘injustice overcome’ story, *The Help* conforms to every tired and rigid stereotype in the Hollywood Catechism and applies the standard, formulaic, Oscar-hungry narrative structure to barely scratch the surface of the infinite complexities of the subject-matter it vainly attempts to communicate. Abandon all hope for three-dimensional characters. Abandon hope for a cogent exploration of the socio-economic conditions and human stories behind Jim Crow-era USA. Substitute that for the most obtuse racial clichés of either the dutiful, compliant, black housemaids (whose deference to their masters only falters with ‘The Help’ (?!?) of our white-knight journalist, Skeeter) or the ‘oh-no-you-dint-sassy-hip-shakin-finger-wavin-neck-jerkin-spunky-mmm...hmm-Afro-American’ female.

Would we be wrong in assuming that this film bills itself as some sort of ‘window into the past’? A ‘look how bad things used to be’ or ‘racism was bad’ historical yarn, told from our post-racial era, and to be admired and applauded by the Obama-voting generation, in a ‘look how far we’ve come’ and ‘look how much we’ve progressed’ self-congratulatory, woop-woop, cinematic-circle-jerk?

We can certainly presume from one of the final scenes, in which the new employer of one of the ‘sassy’ black maids so generously allows her to eat at the same table and use the same toilet as her master, (offering her a ‘job for life’ in the rich, white-picket-fence, suburban household), from this we can glean, from this we can presume, that all is now well in Jackson, Mississippi. The scene is set to a repulsive, violin-heavy musical score to make us feel all warm inside. This gross Spectacle had some moved to tears of joy.

For the employer’s noble offer of ‘a job for life’, substitute, ‘a life of servitude’. For his charitable invitation for the maid to shit in his toilet, read; improving the efficiency of the pre-established system by allowing the *appearance* of fairness and equality with-

out changing the basic arrangement of domination and serfdom.¹ Integration, assimilation and harmonisation in service of the wage-labour economy. A minor adjustment – an adjustment in shitting arrangements – masquerading as *progress*, but truly *in essence*, just a mastering and fine-tuning of the techniques of subjugation. There is no qualitative change, no qualitative progress, no rebalancing of the master-slave dialectic – Just a thin veneer of justice been done to satisfy the grinning Spectators. The white journalist and the white employer has *set her free* with an indoor toilet and a *job for life*. After all, *Arbeit Macht Frei*.

When will they learn? *The Help* induced flashbacks of *Schindler's List*. Oscar Schindler; the benevolent, war-profiteering, Aryan industrialist who saves the down-trodden, docile Jews from the gas chambers and suffers pangs of conscience in the end, crying, 'I could have saved more! If I'd sold my Rolex! I could have saved more! My Bentley! 1000 More! This diamond ring! Another 1000!' But at least Spielberg's film actually managed to conjure some emotions from the audience. For *The Help*, in a scene that correlates almost exactly to Schindler's conscientious outburst, our analogous white saviour, Skeeter offers a token, coy apology to her pliant maids, after being offered a job in New York owing to the commercial success of the passive negro tales that she so heroically recounted and published.

The black men in this film are either violent or absent altogether. There is no mention – save for a fleeting background TV news bulletin – of the waves of protest, the civil disobedience, the multitude of struggles, movements, riots, insurrections that were tearing up and burning down Jim Crow, segregation, discrimination and racial

¹ 'If the worker and his boss enjoy the same television program and visit the same resort places, if the typist is as attractively made up as the daughter of her employer, if the Negro owns a Cadillac, if they all read the same newspaper, then this assimilation indicates not the disappearance of classes (*nor racism*), but the extent to which the needs and satisfactions that serve the preservation of the Establishment are shared by the underlying population.' (Marcuse)

oppression from the bottom up. There is no frame of reference to place this small-town story or the small town characters in their wider context.

Forget *The Help*. If you've got some sort of masochistic desperation for a film that deals with racial oppression, racial tension or 'the issues' properly, re-watch *Do The Right Thing* or *Manderlay* instead.