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Film Review

Kevin Reynolds*: The Beast* (1988)

Ann Fey

The Beast is an American production by Columbia Pictures filmed in Israel. It is a strikingly disturbing war film with an anti-war theme, an open-ended morality play, a heroic tale whose characters range from saints to sadists. Set in Afghanistan in 1981, the second year of the Russian invasion, it is relevant and powerful today, rife with contemporary issues.

Its action is based on the traditional war genre plot: it focuses on a small group of men separated from the army at large, a microcosmic reflection of the larger force. The action centers on a Russian tank and crew heading for Kandahar who take a wrong turn and are lost in the desert. The incidents are war-specific but some elements of the content, production, and presentation of the film seem global in their relevance to other conflicts in these times of desert wars. Around the time of its release American presence in Afghanistan had supplanted the Russian.

Photographically powerful images of horrible explosions, amber dust clouds, fleeting shots of masked alien-like invaders storming and burning villages and poisoning wells, scenes of torture and killing, splash violently across the scene, masterfully timed and lit, artistically controlled and terrible. The structure of the film intersperses these action scenes with calm, quiet exchanges and dialogues, which take place within two different groups: local Afghans and the Russian tank crew.

Among the Afghans, the interactions involve older respected traditional tribal leaders, a Mujahedeen motorcycle riding militant named Mustapha, and the new moderate and idealistic heir to leadership, Taj. As Taj more clearly questions his worthiness to take on his inherited position as Khan, he grows to be more worthy of it. Sherina, the woman in these dunes, leads her sisters with cleverness and emotion. Her movements are tangential to the men, central to the action.

In the tank the Russian crew includes impressionable semi-reluctant but obedient youngster types; a committed, thoughtful moderate Koverchenko whose spectacles (that formulaic costume indicator in both literature and film) underscore his role as rational seeker-of-the-right; and Shazaman, a moderate, religious, idealistic Afghan who is committed to an informed and peacefully unified future world culture.

This crew is headed by a madman, Daskal, a war-mongering beast, inseparable in nature from his secure destroyer tank. This powerful despot unleashes his evil, as he murders Shazaman and leaves the reasonable Koverchenko bound in the desert to die. When Koverchenko is approached by the enemy Afghan group, and Taj is about to kill him, he demands they give him "nanawatal," sanctuary, the Muslim obligation to all who request it. He has come to learn of this obligation from his murdered Muslim cohort. Several scenes -

sensitive, interesting - establish a growing trust between Taj and Koverchenko. The action shifts as they join in in pursuit on foot of Daskal and the wayward tank. High angle shots as the tank crawls along in the desert, close-ups of the churning tracks, traveling shots of the turret seem to personify the beastly tank. Some moments inside recall the psychologically striking atmosphere achieved in *Das Boot* (Wolfgang Petersen 1981).

The film uses some war genre formulae, and some now-familiar images: a soldier straddling the tank's gun like the pilot astride the atomic bomb in the ending of *Dr. Strangelove* (Stanley Kubrick 1964); Koverchenko seen from above suffering in the desert with arms akimbo pinned down like a Christ-figure, and later flying through the air on the end of a helicopter rescue line like a Peter Pan. The madness of the leader Daskal is traditional, more irrational than Captain Queeg in *The Caine Mutiny* (Edward Dmytryk 1954) , madder and more dangerous than Colonel Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola 1979). It is almost amusing to think that this sand-epic action film originated as a stage play by William Mastrosimone. But so did the spectacular *Lawrence of Arabia* (David Lean 1962) first appear in Robert Bolt's stage play.*Elements* in the production blur the historical specificity of the film and make it play for today, an eerie reflection of current news footage from the Middle East. Devoid of architectural indicators, the desert setting becomes generic. The Russian roles take on American identity, as indeed the military roles in that country made the same shift. The Russians are played in this American production by American actors using American accented English. (The Afghan characters' Pashtu words are subtitled, in roles played effectively by American actors who learned their dialogue phonetically.) The role of the despotic Daskal is played by George Dzundza, a familiar American actor well known for his role as a police detective early in the television series *Law and Order*.

Filmed on location in Israel *The Beast* had a brief theatrical release. It was presented in 1988 at the New York and the Toronto Film Festival, was honored at the Cleveland International Film Festival in 1989, and was shortly thereafter withdrawn from distribution. American involvement in Afghanistan at that time may have been relevant. The 2001 release of the digital video has spurred increased interest in the film in the United States.

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Film Review

Neil LaBute: *Nurse Betty* (2000)

Michael Oppermann

From time to time Hollywood seems to produce films that deliberately defy the limitations of conventional narrative cinema. Critics tend to label them as "offbeat" or even "postmodern" because of their subversive play with traditional genres, narrative patterns and our concept of identity. The works of the Coen Brothers immediately come to mind as examples of films totally "off the beaten track." Neil LaBute`s *Nurse Betty*, however, ranks along their finest works. It is a highly interesting and unusual contribution to contemporary cinema in spite of a plot that, initially, sounds more than familiar.

Betty has spent all her life in Fair Oaks, Kansas. She is a waitress married to a rather callous car dealer who betrays her all the time. In short, her marriage is characterized by a striking absence of care and emotion. However, change is on the way because her husband (trying to be clever) has apparently tried to double-cross a cartel of drug dealers. Two killers (Forest Whitaker and Chris Rock as his young apprentice) maltreat him in such a gruesome way that Betty escapes from Fair Oaks, speeding away in her husband`s car. Leaving the "flatlands" of Kansas for the first time, she is now on the way to the Grand Canyon, the dream of her life. What she doesn`t know, however, is that she has several kilos of cocaine in her trunk that her husband tried to hide. For this reason, she is being chased by an incredible number of people, the sheriff of Fair Oaks and a reporter being among them. Unfortunately, though, the two killers are also on her trail.

What sounds like the overture to a solid road movie full of action quickly turns into a pretext to a film that successfully crosses all genres. While Betty approaches the Grand Canyon, a voice within tells her that her name should be Dorothy (the girl from Kansas who was blown by a hurricane into the fairy tale country of *The Wizard of Oz*, and who sang "Somewhere over the Rainbow"). The process of transformation continues when she gradually becomes convinced to be the ex-fiancee of a highly handsome chiropractic from a soap opera (her dream lover apparently because she had already tried to follow his series regularly when working as a waitress). He is her "Reason to Love", to quote the title of the series. "Love is waiting somewhere out there," his voice whispers and Betty believes him. She is set on finding the love of her life who is supposed to live in Los Angeles. So from now on Betty becomes part of an imaginary world, part of a soap opera. The series becomes her "Reason to live". Betty, who is characterized both by her frank and stunning naivety and by a

strange kind of duckwalk, is a fearless dreamer, a “Traumgängerin” (dream walker) who has decided to reside in a reality of her own. It is the sheer goodness and uprightness of her heart that make her totally immune against irony and all signs and insinuations that her world is not real. For her it has become reality, and the film`s skillful direction manages to establish Betty`s specific way of “being”, in the existential sense of the German “Sein”, as a totally natural disposition in life. In the end, even the two killers prove to be “samurais” in spirit; they spare Betty`s life, unable to kill this charming and totally innocent human being.

Nurse Betty is an intelligent and extremely sublime crosswalk on the borders of dream and reality. The film establishes its director Neil LaBute (who has hitherto been known as the author of an extremely grim play called *Bash*, a dark study into the banality of murder, and an equally dark shoestring film debut called *In The Company of Men* from 1996) as one of Hollywood`s most outstanding directors. The film is marked by a subtle kind of humor and a sophisticated play with the conventions of the soap opera genre, which, in a fairly ironical twist, are established as the prime reality. The film`s real winning card is Rene Zellweger, though, who manages to play Betty`s part with such charm and conviction that even the most critical viewer has to agree with her that chiropractics are among the most handsome of men.

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Film Review

Alejandro Amenabár*: The Others (2001)*

Seçil Saraçlı

The Others is Spanish director Alejandro Amenabár's first English language film. After his 1997 film *Abre los ojos'* great commercial success, actor Tom Cruise would be agreed to starred in its Hollywood version *Vanilla Sky* (2001) and to be the producer of *The Others* starring Nicole Kidman (Cruise's former wife).

The Others is set in the late 1945, just as World War II ended, in the isle of Jersey, in the English Channel. Grace (Nicole Kidman) lives in a remote and isolated mansion with her two young children, who are afflicted with a strange and terrible malady that makes it essential for them not to be exposed to daylight. Since bright light causes them to break out in sores that can be fatal, all the windows must be covered with thick curtains. As Grace moves from room to room, she carries a heavy ring of keys with which she unlocks each door and locks it again behind her to ensure against one being carelessly opened or left ajar to let in lethal daylight. In this deteoriating mansion there are 50 doors and 15 keys. Besides, during the occupation of the island, the Germans cut off the electricity and for the sake of children, Grace never restored it. Needless to say, without electricity and with the dense fog constantly enshrouding the creepy house, they are enveloped in almost total darkness. Moreover, in one night, the house's staff has simply vanished without even bothering to collect their wages. Consequently, Grace now has to employ three strangers who appear rather mysteriously out of the fog on the doorstep looking for work. They say they worked in the mansion, years ago, for previous owners and apparently they know something more about the house that Grace does not.

Grace seems to be a strong, authoritarian woman when giving orders to the new servants of the house, though she has to deal with lots of problems related to the house and her children: And although World War II has ended, her husband hasn't returned home, or even sent a word regarding his whereabouts. Besides living in a house devoid of light, she suffers from constant migraine. On top of it, she starts to have more trouble with her two sun-light allergic children: her son who is unusually jittery and her daughter who claims to be hearing a boy's crying and seeing ghosts constantly questions her mother's strict rules. Alone, without a husband, drenched in claustrophobic darkness, isolated without a telephone or a

radio, and with two problematic children that she has to home school, Grace is at the verge of a nervous breakdown.

At first Grace doubts her daughter's visions and calls her a liar, makes her read the Bible aloud in the hallway until she admits her sin. Later Grace continuously traumatizes her children with warnings of "Children's Limbo" and eternal torment, until she starts to hear strange sounds and witnesses bizarre things happening in the house. If the new servants are not plotting anything against her, there must really be intruders in the house.

Creaking doors being opened mysteriously, unexpected footsteps, a piano playing, sounds of sobbing and distant screams heard from empty rooms are the essentials of an effective ghost story. Also, the children's odd malady gives the director Alejandro Amenábar the opportunity to create an eerie mood. The simple device of keeping rooms dark and locked for the children's survival turns out to be a great logical scare tactic. Similar to Stanley Kubric's film *The Shining* (a terror-ridden story of a family of three, trapped in an isolated hotel, where father goes mad and starts killing), he makes perfect use of darkness and with unusual shots of shadowy rooms and empty corridors, making the audience feel more and more claustrophobic. The low-key atmosphere of menace and deliberately slow, tension-building pace are so strong that we almost feel what Grace feels, and begin to feel accustomed to shadows gradually enveloping us. Just like Grace, the audience feels the entrapment and the maximum terror rising. When she walks through the dark hallways, dressed in dark, long and uncomfortable 40s dresses (which are symbolically screaming her repression) she reminds us of post-war film stars. Her being named Grace and also her startling resemblance to young Grace Kelly combined with an outstanding performance in capturing Kelly's icy instability and vulnerability cannot be thought as a mere coincidence. Also, the religious connotations of her name are well suited to her character and her pious defense against evil (real or imagined) and are suggestive of the plot development.

In making *The Others*, Amenabár, seems to have done his best in following the classical Hitchcockian style of horror film genre. Rejecting blood, gore and other computerized special effects, in favor of old-fashioned atmospherics and tension, he prefers to convey classical film techniques, like lack of light or dead silence, which play an equally important role in building the suspense. Here, the power of terror lies in the unseen, the unspoken, and the unheard. It is the dominant projection of the fears of our minds, the terror of our souls, recollected in horrors of the darkness and the unknown, and undoubtedly takes its roots from isolation and repression. At this point, it is hard to decide whether this is a ghost story or a psychological drama.

Stressing the same kinds of terrors of the mind, *The Others* seems to be a perfect allusion to Jack Clayton's *The Innocents* – an adaptation of Henry James' classical ghost story *Turn of the Screw*, in which Deborah Kerr in her role of a high-strung, obsessive governess Miss Giddens gets more and more paranoid about the ghosts and the existence of the evil, in the remote mansion, where she has to live and take care of two children. Just like Miss Giddens, Grace is a young, inexperienced mother who loves her children more than anything and cannot accept any evil presence in her house and she fights in every way to protect them. But, underneath her stern, bossy appearance there lays a very fragile woman who is raised as a Bible fundamentalist Catholic, trapped from the world, sexually repressed – she walks a line between cool self-control and madness and hysteria.

The Others is no doubt a stylistically well-controlled ghost story, with psychological overtones, and a rare example of the classical horror genre, distinguished from the lately released cheap scary movies, which cannot go further beyond being the parodies of the same genre.