

They'll wait and see

Jesus' Son & Croupier

By David Walsh
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Jesus' Son, directed by Alison Maclean, written by Elizabeth Cuthrell, Oren Moverman and David Urrutia, based on the book by Denis Johnson

Croupier, directed by Mike Hodges, written by Paul Mayersberg

There are countless stories one could tell, so why do people choose the ones that they do? Everyone likes to think his or her film is “timeless,” and the best works have universal qualities, but still it would astonish us if a director created a film in 2000 similar in theme and feeling to *Intolerance* (1916) or *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), or even *The Long Goodbye* (1973). For better or worse, contemporary life and historical development must have some impact.

Most people, including people in the film industry, don't know what to make of things, or how they should regard themselves, or others, or the society at large. In big-budget films this is covered over by noise and light and action. The hope is no one in the audience will notice the filmmakers don't understand anything. In the “independent” cinema many directors and writers are hedging their bets. They adopt a “wait-and-see” attitude. It's not clear yet how things are going to go, so they're leaving their options open. “I might be a drug-taking bohemian, but then again perhaps a devout Christian; a radical at war with the system or a millionaire with a fleet of planes.” It's all rather cool, nondescript, evasive. Nobody wants to be anything that will be inconvenient a week from now.

Jesus' Son is not the worst film around by any means. There are any number of competitors for that prize, including Woody Allen's *Small Time Crooks*, in my opinion, an embarrassing film without laughs or insight. *Jesus' Son* is based on the short story collection of the same name written by Denis Johnson and published in 1992 to much acclaim. Its hero, FH (Billy Crudup), wanders around the middle of America in a drug or alcohol-induced haze, wrecking things for himself and other people. Much of the film is taken up with his relationship with Michelle (Samantha Morton), a heroin addict. His selfishness or irresponsibility eventually

contributes to her death. He ends up, off drugs and alcohol, in Phoenix working in a home for the aged and infirm, where he writes the newsletter. There FH undergoes a kind of religious experience and learns the meaning of compassion. The film and the book conclude: “All these weirdos, and me getting a little better every day right in the midst of them. I had never known, never even imagined for a heartbeat, that there might be a place for people like us.”

The scriptwriters have done a relatively scrupulous job of translating Johnson's words and style and meaning to the screen. I don't think the author has anything to complain about. There are interesting images in the film. The first sequences in Iowa City have that cold and unhappy American look, that new American look of people and places barely scraping by, that we saw in *Buffalo '66* and was missing in *Boys Don't Cry*, both far superior to *Jesus' Son*. Crudup and Morton are gifted and sympathetic performers, one couldn't ask for better.

But there is something facile about Johnson's book. It's the kind of self-consciously hardboiled and hallucinatory writing that impresses college students as well as many of their professors. The critic for a popular weekly newsmagazine was bound to describe Johnson as “a visionary angel, a Kerouac or, better yet, a Blake, who has seen his demon and yearned for God and forged a language to contain them both.”

The technique involves putting the down-and-out, generally drunk or stoned hero in unlikely places—a highway in western Missouri, a farmhouse near Iowa City, an abortion clinic in Chicago—surrounding him with “offbeat” characters—a traveling salesman drinking Canadian Club and steering his car while he sleeps, a former college football player pretending (or not?) to be deaf and dumb, an orderly taking more pills than he dispenses—and, with a few verbal flourishes, counting on the results to be amusing, bizarre and somehow “poetic.” Sometimes there's something to it, more often than not it's simply affected. But people who live in comfortable academic surroundings imagine this is life the way it should be lived, in fact, they would live “freely” like

this themselves ... except for the mortgage payments and the children's college fund.

Here's a sample from one of the stories in *Jesus' Son* called "Out On Bail" (annoying character names are another common feature of this style of American writing): "I saw Jack Hotel in an olive-green three-piece suit, with his blond hair combed back and his face shining and suffering. People who knew him were buying him drinks as quickly as he could drink them down at the Vine, people who were briefly acquainted, people who couldn't even remember if they knew him or not. It was a sad, exhilarating occasion. He was being tried for armed robbery. He'd come from the courthouse during the lunch recess. He'd looked in his lawyer's eyes and fathomed that it would be a short trial. According to a legal math that only the mind of the accused has strength to pursue, he guessed the minimum in this case would have to be twenty-five years."

This is all right for a few paragraphs or even a page or two, Johnson has the ability to amuse and get certain details right, but it gets wearing when it dawns on you that the prose is never going to go beyond this sort of essentially school-boyish cleverness. The book passes by you quickly, too quickly.

The book and the film suffer from the common American delusion that truth is something you stumble on accidentally at 3 am in a barroom. This is simply wrong, and it comes from mistaking the condition of being constantly available to the new and remarkable, a state that requires a massive amount of *conscious mental preparation*, with the mere working of happenstance. How many more social and personal catastrophes will it take before this sort of thinking is left behind?

In the end, the worst feature of Johnson's approach is that it directs the attention of the reader or viewer toward finding the Beautiful, albeit grotesque and unlikely, in existing reality. Despite all the sound and fury, there is something essentially complacent about the book and the film. They represent an accommodation with the world, not a protest. It's not for nothing that director Alison Maclean (*Crush*), a New Zealander, describes *Jesus' Son* as "the story of a man who is saved."

Maclean's film could be concrete, sharp, damaging; instead it's self-conscious, too often facetious, essentially soft inside. The problem turns out to be FH's, not America's. We thought for a moment that he'd been messed up by his life, by the barrenness of a certain kind of existence, but, in fact, he's simply a "weirdo," who fortunately finds a home with other weirdos.

Croupier is a British film about a writer who takes a job in a casino. He has a girlfriend who is a store detective and a father with a history of questionable activities. He takes up

with a tough-talking fellow employee, contrary to casino rules, and eventually another woman, a South African, who offers him a good deal of money for playing a minor role in a heist.

The film is directed by veteran Mike Hodges (*Get Carter*, *The Terminal Man*, *Flash Gordon*) and acted by Clive Owen, Gina McKee, Alex Kingston and Kate Hardie with considerable aplomb.

Jack, the croupier, wants to remain detached from the casino activity. He enjoys watching the gamblers lose. At the same time he wants more than a comforting and comfortable existence, so he sticks his neck out for something that doesn't look very promising and for someone who's obviously an operator of one sort or another. The screenwriter Paul Mayersberg says, "We have a choice in life between working in the casino or the risk-taking of being a gambler. The question arises: do you want a life of security or a life of risk? The answer is: we want both." Yes, well...

Mayersberg says that an influence was Akira Kurosawa's *The Hidden Fortress* (1958), in which the lead characters are minor figures, hangers-on. Critics have also cited Jean-Pierre Melville's *Bob Le Flambeur* (1955), about a doomed plan to knock over the Deauville casino, as a possible inspiration. Whatever the case, it must be said that both those films radiated a good deal more energy.

Croupier is eminently watchable and intelligent, but its rather abstract consideration of the passive and the active seems limited. The film has more bite, more specificity, when it shows a satirical streak, taking on some of the dreadful types that have appeared in recent years in Britain. In particular there's the *nouveau riche* publisher who first commissions Jack to write a sports novel, because that's hot, and then shows up at a bookshop with his newest author in tow, a Balkan terrorist who's produced a "kill-and-tell" work. At those nastier moments the film comes to life.

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