Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

In Film, Complexity Isn't Reality

Fred Russell · Wednesday, June 25th, 2014

I am always amused when Hollywood actors and directors talk about the complexity of their characters. Most often they are talking about a few striking characteristics arbitrarily tacked on to the single dimension of the character to give him a certain individuality or credible motivation and which has very little to do with what real human beings are like. Complexity in human beings is conflict, which may resolve itself into a certain mode of behavior or remain unresolved and yield inconsistent modes of behavior. In all cases the complexity consists of what is going on in the individual's mind. This the popular film does not know how to represent, so instead it displays the opposed impulses side by side, showing now one and now the other and at best "unifying" them with a hackneyed "back story." A good example, which I caught on TV not too long ago, is *In the Electric Mist* (2009), directed by a Frenchman, Bertrand Tavernier, which in itself evokes the idea of cinema, though he is mostly a creator of thrillers, and starring Tommy Lee Jones, a very competent actor. Here is how Tavernier describes the "complexity" of the Jones character to *Cineaste*:

> **Cineaste:** What is it you like about Dave Robicheaux?
>
> **Tavernier:** The fact that he is such a complex character. He is somebody who has wounds, who has been hurt by life, but who still fights on behalf of what George Orwell called "the common decency." He typifies all the virtues of that expression: the sense of collectivity and idealism, generosity, the act of giving without receiving. Although he has a wife and family, Robicheaux is also very solitary. He is haunted by the idea of rediscovering the Louisiana of his childhood, he is willing to fight to rediscover it. He would like to change the world but he knows that the world won't be changed. He seeks to protect his moral integrity. He is alone because he doesn't want his wife to be involved in his work. His first wife was killed by gangsters. He is someone who has already paid dearly for his moral integrity. He tries to protect his house, which is a kind of oasis for him. But he has dark, somber streaks that make him complex and very human. When he has explosions of violence, he feels guilty about them. He suffers remorse. I like men who fight, who have shadows and who are not always right. I like them even if their battle is not likely to succeed. I have an enormous tenderness for Robicheaux…. I feel very close to that, to the violence and to his regrets for using it as he does.

All this is true of pretty much every other police detective seen on the screen, the most visible manifestation of which is usually a drinking problem, just as is the case with Robicheaux. The banality of Hollywood characterization is generally swallowed up and thereby masked in the persona of the actor, whose living presence deceives the viewer into believing that he is observing a real human being rather than an empty caricature. The actors themselves are completely taken in, as they have to be if they are to act credibly, and speak about their one-dimensional characters in the same solemn terms as Tavernier, as though these hard-drinking cops and Academy Award-winning stockbrokers and psychopaths had been lifted right out of Dostoevsky. It is precisely this hollowness that makes scripted speech sound so unnatural, unlike improvised speech, which comes from the actor and not the character. The actor acts out now one emotion, now another, first anger, then tenderness, then rage, then remorse, and this is meant to represent his complexity but is in fact manipulated to meet the demands of the "plot" and has very little to do with how real human beings acting out of inner necessity actually act.

Aside from their entertainment value, however, popular films do have their function, though it is not to depict actual life. Their function is to embody the society's myths, and this, unconsciously, they do very well, however crudely vis-à-vis the Ancient Greeks and Romans. The central myth of American life is the myth of the hero, around whom are woven other myths, like the myth of perfect love. The old myths grappled with metaphysical and etiological problems. The modern myths, in the age of the individual, deal with our private dreams. Essentially, they address themselves to our feelings of inadequacy and offer us the chance to live vicariously through the characters on the screen. This is no small thing, and clearly necessary in societies such as ours. That is why they make so much money.

Image: Tommy Lee Jones in Tavernier's 'In the Electric Mist.'