

The Human Element

Intolerable Cruelty should be prosecuted for intolerable smugness, the besetting sin of its authors, the filmmaking brothers Ethan and Joel Coen. Venial in the past, their high-handed self-satisfaction has turned mortal here, curdling what should have been a creamy evocation of the screwball comedies Hollywood produced so reliably in the 1940's.

The story begins as a promising send-up of America's eighth sacrament, divorce, and the priests who administer it, the order of "matrimonial" attorneys. George Clooney plays Miles Massey, divorce lawyer to the rich and vile. We first meet him at his dentist's office, having his teeth whitened as he conducts business on his cell phone. With dental gauze covering his face, we see little more than his choppers exercising themselves in the glare of ultraviolet light. He is visually reduced to what he has made of himself: a mouthpiece of insufferable smarminess. In the following scene, we find him in his own office tending to the woes of an adulterous blonde whose wealthy television-director husband has caught her in bed with another man. She is unnerved at the prospect of losing the lavish life her husband has afforded her. Massey listens with seeming sympathy, turned in his chair to display himself in a flatteringly slender three-quarter profile. It is his practiced posture, doubtlessly borrowed from TV anchormen who simulate trustworthy gravitas on air while hiding any indication of unseemly girth. It would not do to let *hoi polloi* notice that you are living large on their miseries. Having heard the poor woman's sordid tale, Massey quickly reassures her by shuffling its elements for jury consumption. In his improved narrative, the lady comes upon her husband having a lover's argument with the other fellow. Although shocked to discover her husband is homosexual, she nevertheless heroically intervenes before he can do violence to his inamorata. When Massey pauses to see how she is responding to his legal guff, her initial misgivings fade in the dazzle of his pearly whites.

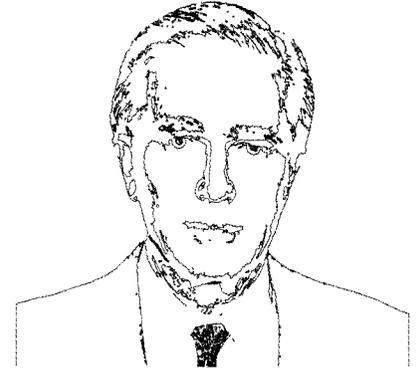
So far, so good. But Massey's radiance pales by comparison when the incandescent Marilyn (Catherine Zeta-

Jones) shows up. She is the wife of his next client, a bumptious realtor who has been stupid enough to marry this conning vixen without an "impenetrable" Massey prenuptial contract. Now that he has followed his "wandering pee-pee" into legally demonstrable adultery, Marilyn is preparing to nail him to the wall and his assets to her bank account.

I should not give any more away, although you will probably be able to negotiate most of the film's twists well in advance of the usual signposts announcing lust and greed. This predictability is part of the problem. Tone-deafness is the other. When the otherwise comic script willfully detours into homicidal territory, its wheels lose the road for no better reason than that the Coens want to include some cool, smart-alecky gags. This reckless driving is all the more disappointing because Clooney and Zeta-Jones play their parts so well.

As the apparently suave, in-control lawyer, Clooney has never been funnier. He more than justifies all the comparisons to Cary Grant that he has garnered over the years. He is an indictably handsome leading man, supremely negligent of his classic good looks. When Massey is called on the carpet by his boss, Clooney transforms himself so thoroughly that he resembles a fifth grader who has been caught using a four-letter word. His languidly athletic stance suddenly goes knock-kneed, as though he is wetting himself. His deep tigerish eyes widen and somehow sag at the corners, pleading that he not be subjected to the paddle. For her part, Zeta-Jones balances her fully ripened womanhood (you don't have to be acquainted with the checkout gossip rags to know she's had babies) with an icily calculating demeanor, a high-wire act guaranteed to drive insecure roosters like Massey wild. This battle of the sexes is carried off deftly enough at first, although never with the élan of a Preston Sturges or a Billy Wilder. Nevertheless, if the script had not taken its fatal turn, the Zeta-Jones/Clooney *trompe l'oeil* might have put this film in a league with Sturges's *The Lady Eve*.

The film's opening credit sequence forecasts its difficulties. Animated cardboard cutouts of Victorian figures in vari-



Intolerable Cruelty

Produced by Alphaville Films
and Imagine Entertainment
Written and Directed by Joel Coen
and Ethan Coen
Distributed by Universal Pictures

Lost in Translation

Produced by American Zoetrope
and Elemental Films
Written and Directed
by Sofia Coppola
Distributed by Focus Features

ous postures of courtship dance across the screen. Cupids hover everywhere, and golden arrows fill the air. It is a harbinger of the cutout characters that populate the story, men and woman comically rendered two-dimensional by manners and hormones as they play their prescribed roles in a tale of romance and consequence. Even two-dimensional characters, however, must have some behavioral consistency if they are to engage us. The Coens' characters do not. They are merely *papier-mâché* conveniences twisted into arbitrary poses to ridicule American conventions. While I am quite prepared to laugh at divorce and its legal profiteers, I cannot be amused by characters who are cynical worldlings one moment and—hey, presto—love-besotted swains the next. Even performers as accomplished as Clooney and Zeta-Jones cannot negotiate such instantaneous transformations without a human bridge.

The Coen brothers remind me of Evelyn Waugh's caricature of a Bauhaus architect, Professor Otto Silenus in *Decline and Fall*. Silenus designs sleek glass and aluminum structures and then complains bitterly when he is forced to equip them with such human accommodations as

staircases and closets. "The problem with architecture," he declares, "is the problem of all art—the elimination of the human element from the consideration of form. . . . All ill comes from man," he gloomily concludes. Despite their devotion to irony, the ever-formalistic Coens seem to have taken Professor Silenus at his word.

Waugh shows up more deliberately in Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation*. The film takes place in Tokyo and features a secondary character, a ditsy starlet come to promote her latest Hong Kong action film. She confides to some friends that, for privacy's sake, she has checked into her hotel as Evelyn Waugh. This seems appropriate, since her hotel is one of the many anonymous glass towers that make up the film's locations and might have satisfied Professor Silenus' obsession with characterless architecture—but not quite. Several of these frigidly austere buildings sport walking and talking humans in 40-foot-high video displays. One of them looks mightily like Bill Murray holding a glass of Suntory whiskey under a wryly knowing moue.

Murray is Bob Harris, a married man, a father, and a nearly washed up movie action-hero. He has come to Japan to be filmed drinking this whiskey, a promotional service he is willing to perform for a scant two million dollars. Upon first arriving, he is chagrined to see his image on Japanese buildings and buses. Wincing slightly at the absurdity of his fame, Murray's face registers Bob's regret at finding himself turned into an advertising prop of Brobdingnagian dimensions. The disproportion between this fatuously ideal figure and his aging, disappointed self needs no comment.

Although Coppola does not possess Waugh's light satiric touch, her reference to him serves as an apt introduction to her characters in this loopy film. Like so many of Waugh's figures, hers find themselves rendered ciphers by the forces of modernity, manifested here as jet-lagged dislocation, celebrity infatuation, and tawdry self-merchandising, all played out against a high-tech urban milieu, glassily impervious to traditional human longings.

Coppola has learned from her father on this score. In his master work, *The Conversation*, Francis Ford used San Francisco's glass-and-steel corporate fortresses with their eerily sound-cushioned interiors to create a soulless limbo in which the high and mighty wield their

joyless power. The Tokyo hotel to which the weary Bob is taken by a gaggle of Japanese p.r. agents has the same vacancy about it. Its rooms have floor-to-ceiling windows that only succeed in emphasizing their funereal gray-black interiors. When not being shepherded about by his overly solicitous hosts, Bob spends much of his time sitting on his bed alone and comatose, staring into the blank middle distance. For relief, he goes to the hotel lounge, only to encounter more distorted reflections. Two fans at the bar recognize him and ask if he did his own stunt driving in his films. In the background, an American chanteuse renders Simon and Garfunkel ditties with embarrassing urgency. The American culture of which he is so conspicuously a part does not get lost in translation but ironically clarified. It is as if he were in one of those Kafkaesque dreams in which the strangeness of daily experience suddenly stands out in ghastly relief. Translated to Tokyo, the cultural background of Los Angeles is stripped of its cloak of ordinariness and revealed in all of its surreal banality.

All is not Kafka, however. Bob has a soul companion a few hotel floors away who promises to reorient him. She is 22-year-old Charlotte (Scarlett Johansson) whose photographer husband is off shooting on location, leaving her to fend for herself. She is all too ready to understand Bob's anomie, deprived herself of the habitual props of daily routine and ritual affection. After a few *pas de deux*, she and Bob enter into a wary friendship that wavers at the doorway of romance, never quite arriving at, nor stepping away from, the sill. In the warmth of their mutual attraction, they thaw and squirm free of their emotional deep freeze. Murray's dead gaze begins to twinkle with mischief. Johansson's slow, tentative smiles and defensive smirks turn to open laughter and her plump, ungainly body suddenly becomes gracefully lithe. This is the way with romance: It opens people

up to each other, translating their secret languages; it creates a private library of meaning. Estranged from their surroundings, they construct an unlikely existential relationship in which they are free to speak what is unspeakable at home: Bob's self-disgust and fear of death; Charlotte's doubts about her husband and her future. He is charmed by her innocence; she, by his experience.

And that's about it. But it's a pretty hefty it, one rarely dealt with in American films. This is not to say that the film lives up to its critical hype. Some have hailed it as the equivalent of *The Bicycle Thief*, *Rashomon*, and *La Dolce Vita*. In truth, it's a small film with the merest wisp of a plot that profits enormously from the presence of two very substantial performers. They manage to anchor it for a surprising portion of its 100 minutes. Even Murray and Johansson, however, cannot keep the narrative fluff from floating away at times. It would have been far better at half the length, both structurally and thematically.

By going on too long, Coppola risks destroying her moral *donnée*. In order to avoid entering into physical intimacy with Charlotte, Bob takes care to keep up the transparent fiction that their meetings happen more often than not by chance. Stretching the film to 100 minutes, Coppola must strain to come up with different ways for these "chance" encounters to take place. Furthermore, without much of a plot to distract us, she seems to be making her thematic point over and over. It is a shame that films are expected to fit themselves to a studio-prescribed 90-to-120-minute length. This film would have made a wonderful 50-minute feature on an old-fashioned double bill. Still, it is well worth seeing. It does something unheard of in American films today, presenting a man and a woman wise enough not to act on their impulses and thereby drive their respective spouses into the grasping hands of a Miles Massey. c



A Dripping Spring

The parallel trails of brown smoke tracking west to east 50 or so miles ahead above the place where the Grand Canyon ought to be had a sinister aspect, suggesting another greasy invasion by the encroaching metropoli of the desert Southwest.

"Is that L.A.?" I asked Tom Sheeley. "Or is it only Vegas?"

Tom shook his head. "I heard the Park Circus was getting ready to do a controlled burn on the North Rim. You know what a controlled burn is, don't you? Like a controlled deficit, sort of."

At Grand Canyon City on the South Rim, the tourists seethed resentfully, aiming their cameras into the smoky abyss opening away below, like Hell, a few inches ahead of their toes. From the road out to Hermit's Rest, we observed twin smoke columns rolling majestically into the hot blue sky and, below a thousand feet or so, red-and-white choppers trailing orange slurry buckets from a cable, on a bee-line cross-canyon toward the conflagration.

"How'd you feel if you'd traveled thousands miles to see *this*?" Tom asked.

"I know it. If word gets out this really was a controlled burn, the park people could find themselves with a bunch of lawsuits on their hands. It's a good life, America."

Damon's truck was not parked at the trailhead when we got there. "He said he was hoping to make it here by about ten," Tom told me. "It's just nine, now. We'll go on down, set up camp, and drink beer while we're waiting for him."

We finished loading the packs, strapped them on our shoulders, and started down from the Rim by switchbacks descending to the Esplanade. My last time on the Hermit Trail, 18 months before, the vast airy bays between the precipitous canyon walls had been a flat gray with the whirling snow; today, they were suffused by the blue smoke haze. "Like smoking a f---ing pack of cigarettes," Tom said disgustedly.

The world that exists below the rim of the Grand Canyon is different from the one above it. So much is obvious, perhaps, from a look over the guardrail at any one of the several observation points; yet the difference is not what a casual vis-

itor might expect. It is not, for instance, the difference between life and the absence of life, or between activity and primeval stillness. Nor is it a matter of the human world as opposed to the nonhuman one. Besides healthy populations of insects, reptiles, birds, fish, and mammals, there are populations of human beings as well. These, though small, are also healthy. And crazy. Their health, in fact, is in direct proportion to their craziness, which is conclusively proved by their self-destructive behavior and instantly recognizable for the insanity it is by the thousands of sane humans flocking with their cameras and ice-cream cones at the tour-bus stops. We are talking here about the successors to the Indians, river explorers, miners, farmers, and hermits of the pioneer days: the rafters, dorymen, and kayakers, rock climbers, backpackers, adventure photographers, hikers, and runners who inhabit the canyon at all seasons of the year and in every sort of weather, totally unencumbered by any sort of civilized infrastructure beyond a boatload of supplies and a packload of grub, water, and warm clothes to sustain them. You cannot spot them from civilization, and even the boats are barely discernible to the naked eye as they ply the thin green ribbon of the Colorado River, 5,000 feet and more below the South Rim. Yet they are down there nonetheless—invisible ciphers struggling on the tortuous trails scratched into sheer cliff walls, camped in fragile tents beside seasonal creeks and holed up on the extremity of wind-racked points; running fatal rapids in pea-pod craft and hanging 250 feet above the desert floor from nylon ropes attached to rotten monoliths; filtering water as if life depended on it (it does) and husbanding their final packets of denatured chicken soup; consuming themselves cell by cell and calling it fun, while stopping just short (most of the time) of the boundary beyond which human life cannot be reconstituted, like the Phoenix.

A quarter-mile down, we overtook a middle-aged couple day-hiking in to Dripping Springs, at the foot of the Coconino formation across the head of Hermit Canyon. The man's slung canteen slipped from his shoulder onto the trail as I came



up behind; I retrieved the thing and handed it to him in going round them. The canvas was damp from leakage; the soft-sided receptacle slack and virtually empty. "My useless canteen," the fellow remarked, with a smile that made me shudder. Thirty minutes later, at the junction of the Boucher and Dripping Springs trails, I considered leaving a pint bottle propped against the signpost but decided against it. Another half-mile, and he'd have all the sweet, pure limestone water he could hold.

Forty-five minutes out from camp, Tom slipped the shoulder straps on his heavy pack, set the pack down beside the trail, and hiked up a boulder slide to the cache he had put in there the week before. The water, beer, and canned goods added a good 30 pounds to the load he was carrying, without slowing him up visibly. We reached Yuma Point at a little past noon, raised our camp, and sat on the sandstone ledge, hanging our heels above the Tonto Rim 1,600 feet below to eat our lunch. Twenty-five or thirty miles away by line of sight across the Grand Canyon, the twin smoke pillars continued to boil up, tilting eastward under a stiff wind.

"I hope Damon is able to make it down here with us," I said.

"He'll make it, all right. You can set your watch by Damon. Man, I haven't seen a fire like that in the 30-plus years I've been hiking the canyon."

I was digging in my pack for binoculars a quarter of an hour later when a figure in white, wearing a white cap and carrying a red backpack, appeared among the blackbrush and juniper trees, headed for camp. Tom came over to greet him and make introductions, and, when Damon put his hand out, it held a beaded cylinder the size of an oil can.

"That's for all those *Hundredth Meridians*," he said. "It's good meeting you."

Ernest Hemingway only won a Nobel