

Sex, Lies and Needlework:

REVIEW OF *THE SCARLET LETTER* (NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE; MOVIE DIRECTED BY ROLAND JOFFE)

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I have an image of an extraterrestrial anthropologist holding a copy of Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1850 novel in one hand and a video tape of Roland Joff's 1995 film in the other. I imagine her examining these two versions of *The Scarlet Letter* as the only artefacts of human culture available to her. I can hear her baffled query: 'what could cause such regression in a civilisation?'

Happily there is more to contemporary culture on planet Earth than films like *The Scarlet Letter*. However, the features which make it such a dull artefact are standard formulaic requirements in Hollywood; features such as two-dimensional characters and a world of moral certainty. Hollywood fare seems each day to become more entrenched and more omnipresent as the dominant cultural product on this planet. At the same time the 1996 United States election campaign is in my living room. American public life seems more Hollywoodesque than ever. Highlights of Clinton's 1996 campaign include Christopher Reeve addressing the Democratic Convention and Barbra Streisand performing at Clinton's 50th birthday celebration (fund raiser). Meanwhile the Republicans lost the support of star, Bruce Willis, after presidential candidate Bob Dole criticised *Striptease*, the latest film of Willis' wife, Demi Moore, as damaging to public morals. However, the Republicans still have Charlton Heston speaking on party platforms across America. Heston defends the right to bear arms-not because he's in favour of guns but because he's in favour of the American Constitution. The political offers of simplistic solutions and moral certainty are not unlike the cultural offering of Joffe's *The Scarlet Letter*.

I learn that Hollywood stars (such as Dustin Hoffman and Paul Newman)

and powerbrokers (such as David Geffen and Steven Spielberg) are contributors to the Democratic Party. Contributions create obligations. If the 20th century saw the United States become the Earth's greatest military, industrial complex, the 21st century will inherit it as the greatest military, industrial, entertainment complex. The media and entertainment industry has joined the forces that drive global economies and political processes. Image makers and 'spin doctors' are well established members of any successful politicians staff. CNN (Cable News Network) is as potent a political platform as Congress. Lawmakers become filmmakers and filmmakers become lawmakers as each seeks to feed and manipulate public opinion. It is not accidental that films like *The Scarlet Letter* seem to reflect the same values and desires as election campaigns. In the case of *The Scarlet Letter*, the filmmakers, professional story tellers, seem to have been so blinded by the demands to keep it simple and safe that, in the process, they lost a good story.

Hawthorne's novel opens with Hester Prynne emerging from the prison door. She is a woman, guilty of adultery, carrying her illegitimate child in her arms. It is the mid-1600s in the New England colony that was to become Boston, Massachusetts. Hester is being escorted to the market place where she mounts the pillory and is publicly humiliated. Her continuing punishment is 'for the remainder of her natural life, to wear a mark of shame upon her bosom' (63), *The Scarlet Letter* 'A'. In an act which may be defiance or self-flagellation, Hester applies her skill with the needle to make the letter 'fantastically embroidered' (53). In the novel we know nothing of the circumstances of the adultery. It is only later that the reader discovers the identity of her lover. While she is being pilloried, her husband, Roger Prynne, arrives in town for the first time. This is two years after he sent Hester ahead of him from the old world to settle in the colony. He chooses to hide his identity as her cuckolded husband. From this dramatic day the novel chronicles the following seven years until the even more dramatic denouement. The drama involves Hester living a life of atonement, branded with *The Scarlet Letter* and supporting herself and her daughter, Pearl, on income from her needlework. Her lover, the Reverend Dimmesdale, lives a lie for seven years as the town's pious pastor. He is tormented by guilt and by the weakness that prevents him from admitting paternity and sharing the burden of punishment with Hester. Roger Prynne is consumed by searching out and exacting revenge against Dimmesdale.

Little of the above is to be seen in Joffe's film. What is seen is more and more of Moore, including a striptease in one bath scene. The film radically alters the plot, the characters and the tone of the novel. Admittedly, the

film describes itself as 'freely adapted from the novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne'. My interest is not in the fact that the film changes the story, but in the ways the story is changed. An adaptation process which methodically removes interest from the text is intriguing.

Three features of Joffe's film are striking. First, it is a text in which meaning is mediated by a clear authorial voice; secondly, it creates a world in which human nature is knowable as either good or evil-in Hollywood terms, people are either 'goodies' or 'baddies'; and, thirdly, it creates a world of moral certainty where binary opposites are stable and virtue is transparent and reliable. These three features of the film are antithetical to Hawthorne's novel. They are telling points of comparison between the novel and the film as cultural products which feed into public and political life.

AUTHORIAL VOICES

Hawthorne's novel, first published in 1850, is still a challenging read. The text anticipates the psychoanalytic conception of the subject as divided against itself which is later retheorised by post-structuralists (84, 148, 217, 222). Long before the 'death of the author', Hawthorne positions himself as merely an 'editor' of the story of Hester Prynne (4). The reader is kept thinking and unsettled, never sure of an authorial voice. Hawthorne's touch is subtle. It is only on reflection that the reader realises the force of this scathing parody of Puritan law and lore (218-19, 250-1, 261). The novel's world is one of unstable meanings. Signs such as beauty (53, 56), pious speech (66), an innocent child (89) and ultimately, *The Scarlet Letter* itself (31, 54, 104, 161-3), are unreliable. Hawthorne provocatively places the prison at the centre of his picture of Puritan society and the reader is invited to contemplate ideas that Foucault expounds more than 100 years later regarding the relationship between discipline, the state and religion and the desire to mark the body of the criminal (47, 49-50, 63, 82). Hawthorne queries the role of judges and the politics of who judges whom with particular interest in male judges and female offenders (56, 64-5). The text toys with subversion as radical as the proposition that 'the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew' (165). It purports to look forward to a new feminist order where 'a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness' (263). The novel's critique of the legal system and its critique of the place of women are bound together so that each is presented as structural and systemic. However, even at these moments, it is

impossible to be sure of the extent of the text's irony.

In contrast, the film's authorial voice could not be more fixed. The film has a narrator. The film opens with Pearl narrating the story of her mother's arrival in the township. Narrator Pearl gives the film a touch of *Little House on the Prairie*. The wholesome voice of Jodhi May works to remove darkness and eliminates the tension over the fate of Pearl which permeates the book. Narrator Pearl commences the story two years earlier than the novel begins. All the drama of opening on a young woman, babe in arms, emerging from prison and proceeding to the pillory, before townspeople calling for her blood, is lost. Even more of a handicap for the drama is the loss of all the unknowns in Hawthorne's text. By filling in the blanks and removing the mystery in the tale, the filmmakers leave little reason for the viewer to keep watching. However, perhaps the most sorely missed aspect of Hawthorne's story is irony. The film's world of clear meanings and moral certainty is an irony-free zone.

'GOODIES' AND 'BADDIES'

In the interests of casting Hester (Demi Moore) and Dimmesdale (Gary Oldman) as 'goodies', the film laboriously explains the full circumstances of the adultery, and places the actions of Hester and Dimmesdale beyond reproach. This one fatal blow robs the text of the sin which is the drama's whole impetus! The book is uncompromising on the point that Hester and Dimmesdale have sinned. They have sinned against the laws of their community and they accept that legal system's verdict. That's the whole point. They are subject to the legal system because they have internalised its laws. The personal struggles of Hester and Dimmesdale only make sense in a context of guilt. Having removed the sin and the guilt, the filmmakers fail to provide any convincing impetus for the story.

In a portrayal of Hester as defiant and self-righteous, Moore seems to be shooting for feisty but lands stolid. This representation is the antithesis of that in the novel where Hester believes she has sinned and is preoccupied with repentance and survival. In the novel, Hester is complicit in her own punishment. She accepts her role as sinner and structures its terms by imposing her own exile within the township (78-88). Hawthorne's Hester is a survivor who appears to submit to patriarchal authority. The book is a study of the psychology of transgression not of rebellion. Joffe seeks to make Hester a rebel but undermines her defiance by casting her as dependent on the public support of a strong man, in the form of Dimmesdale,

who eventually defects from the ranks of the town's powerbrokers to join Hester in protest. Hester's powerlessness is emphasised by her alliance with Mistress Hibbins (Joan Plowright), whom Joffe casts as social pariah and transforms, from the novel's menacing, predatory witch, to supportive, bawdy, earth mother. Hester (or is it Moore?) remains firmly the object of the gaze-Dimmesdale's, Roger Prynne's, a token lecherous male's, the community's and the viewers'. This further compromises her subversive potential by eroticising her defiance.

Constructing a world populated by 'goodies' and 'baddies' precludes the study of the gradual descent into evil and growth into virtue which is explored in the novel. In the novel, Roger Prynne is a study of the progression of an ordinary man into a fiend by his own choice. The film portrays Prynne (Robert Duvall) as a monster so that the pleasure an ordinary man may find in evil need not be brooked.

In the novel, Dimmesdale is the tortured victim of his own cowardice and, like Hester, is wracked with guilt. The film has removed the sin so there is no cause for guilt. The film requires that Dimmesdale be a 'hero' and romantic lead so there is no possibility of cowardice. However, the film retains Dimmesdale as wracked and tortured. By what? This is never explained. His torment is only consistent with an inner struggle. But the film's characters have no inner conflicts. Narrator Pearl tells us that Dimmesdale desperately wants to acknowledge paternity but is constrained by the request of Hester. To live against your conscience for seven years in order to please is just silly.

The construction of Dimmesdale determines the ending of both texts. The novel culminates powerfully with the climax of Dimmesdale's internal struggle. He finally calls the bluff of the law. The law's power to tyrannise falls away as the subject no longer internalises the belief that his sin is unspeakable. But, at once, his struggle towards integrity exacts a tragic cost. In contrast, the film gives us Hester and Dimmesdale clip-clopping off into the sunset, happily ever after.

MORAL UN/CERTAINTY

Hawthorne's book is a critique of moral certainty. Joffe's film celebrates moral certainty.

The novel gives a searching presentation of the possibility that all oppo-

sites inhere in each other. It asks 'whether hatred and love be not the same thing at bottom' (260). It demonstrates that *The Scarlet Letter* and Hester are signs in which meaning collapses. Hester and *The Scarlet Letter* come to signify both sin and virtue, both transgression and transcendence of the law (161-5). One of the most compelling aspects of the novel is the reader's sense of sharing Hawthorne's tentative journey around this challenging philosophical insight. In the novel's world of uncertain and unstable meaning the only moral anchor is personal integrity - 'Be true! Be true! Be true!' (260).

The novel is confronting because all the merits of the case are not clear. Unlike Joffe's viewer, the reader is left unsettled by uncertainty about guilt and its degrees in the characters and in the laws and structures of this Puritan community. There is no clearly appropriate resolution of the drama. The reader remains in suspense as the end approaches. Precisely where Hawthorne's text presents ambivalence, the film programs and orchestrates clear judgments and emotional responses for its viewers. Hence there is little demand for intellectual engagement on the part of the audience and the story suffers from predictability. The result is boring for the viewer.

Hawthorne's presentation of a neurotically punitive legal system as an expression of Christian virtue is played down in the film. Instead, less potent violence, in the form of blood and gore, is added. The goriest violence in the film emanates from the indigenous Americans. This serves to externalise the violence in a safe casing of racism. In contrast to the ingenious and subtle revenge devised by Roger Prynne in the novel, the film's Prynne sets out to murder Dimmesdale. Prynne kills as he was taught to kill by the Indians. Narrator Pearl has already spelled out for us that Prynne's 'unstable nature' was 'freed' from the civilising force of society while living with the Indians. The film eliminates the confronting suggestion, made by the novel, that all the violence of Roger Prynne's revenge, and of the Puritan creed, are of the community's own making.

It is this desire for a world of moral certainty, where human nature is transparent, meaning is knowable and violence is other, that resonates through party political life as well as through movie life. While the filmmaking process resulted in the loss of a good story, perhaps it is a story that mainstream America and the entertainment complex feels it cannot afford to tell.

REFERENCES

Hawthorne N 1990 *The Scarlet Letter* Oxford University Press Oxford and New York (first published 1850). All page references in the text are to this edition.

Cinergi Pictures Entertainment Inc. and Cinergi Productions New York Inc. 1995 *The Scarlet Letter* a Roland Joff  film (producer/director), presented by Andrew G Vajna (producer), a Lightmotive/Allied Stars/Cinergi/Moving Pictures production. All references in the text are to this film. Earlier film adaptations of *The Scarlet Letter* include: a 1926 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer production directed by Victor Sjöström; a 1934 American production directed by Robert G Vignola; and, a 1971 German production directed by Wim Wenders.