

# Pious winks: black comedy is becoming grey

by Steve Gravestock

Black Comedy emerged from the failure of humanism and its excessively optimistic view of human nature. The genre requires a cruel, somewhat inhuman distance from the horrible events on which it focusses. To some extent, human beings must become objects, otherwise we wouldn't be able to laugh at the cruelties the form depicts.

At the same time, if the artists don't enter into their characters' follies to some degree, their works have no human reality at all. The genre attempts to transcend irrationality and disaster by seeing it comically, from a distance, evoking a semi-hysterical, mystical response.

Normally, when black comedies fail, it is because the artists don't have the right moral approach. If they are afraid to empathize with their characters or share their follies, their films seem cold and inhuman; if they moralize too much, they don't allow the audience to enjoy the nastiness.

Black comedy has enjoyed a recent vogue in Hollywood, but the filmmakers who have exploited the genre show little understanding of how it works. They make blatantly liberal humanist black comedies, a contradiction in terms. The filmmakers chronicle breakdowns in social order, and then deny that they mean anything.

According to them, if we just act a little more rationally and humanely, things can always change. These filmmakers often soft-pedal nastiness or keep their distance from it. They want the audience to respect them for being hip enough to laugh at human irrationality, but have nothing to offer them other than traditional pieties.

They wink at us piously.

These films resemble the spy farces that abounded in the 1960s. *Heathers*, *War of the Roses* and *She-Devil* all falter primarily because the people who made them were too moralistic.

Michael Lehmann's *Heathers* (written by Daniel Waters) is about a teenage couple (played by Winona Ryder and Christian Slater) which systematically dispatches their cliquish, almost fascistic fellow students, disguising their murders as suicides.

All of the performers are good, particularly Ryder, Slater, Kim Walker (who plays a member of

one of the cliques) and Penelope Milford (who plays a left-over hippie teacher). The dialogue is intermittently brilliant, including some nifty references to pop culture.

Unfortunately, *Heathers* is centred around Ryder's Veronica, who is eminently sensible and unbelievably "nice." Consequently, the audience never doubts that she'll do the "right thing." We aren't allowed to enjoy the nasy, witty bits because the filmmakers undercut it with their consistent preaching. The film fizzles into a sappy, condescending ending when Veronica rejects an offer of friendship from one of the cooler teens to spend time with an unattractive, uncool one.

Susan Seidelman's *She-Devil* (written by Strugatz and Burns from the novel *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* by Fay Weldon) tries to be a bitchy revenge fantasy, a feminist *Kind Hearts and Coronets*. Accountant Bob Patchett (Ed Begley Jr.) leaves his frumpy wife, Ruth (Roseanne Barr), for thin, elegant, wealthy romance novelist Mary Fisher (Meryl Streep). Ruth then wreaks revenge on the pair.

The Strugatz-Burn script has a couple of good ideas in it, but it never goes far enough. Ruth is too virtuous; she uses people, but never cruelly. It's a very chaste, very tepid revenge fantasy. Inexplicably, she's never really angry at Fisher, who is the real she-devil. After all, she is as much to blame for the affair as Bob is. Worse, the writers turn Ruth into a defender and supporter of oppressed, downtrodden women. She starts an employment agency which recruits women which the world

(meaning their husbands) has left behind.

The film features a great performance by Meryl Streep. She satirizes a romance novelist's pretensions and fatuities expertly. Her performance is undercut by Seidelman's direction, though; whenever Streep gets something going, Seidelman cuts away. She lacks the intelligence to center the film on Streep, and keeps trying, instead, for a postmodernist tone. (In Seidelman's eyes, postmodernism means a lot of references to television and pointless pop culture. She makes you long for Chaucer.)

Remember the scene in *Bringing Up Baby* where Katherine Hepburn broke her heel and limped around repeating, "I was born on the side of a hill?" All of Seidelman's projects seem to have been born on the side of a hill.

Like *She-Devil* and *Heathers*, *The War of the Roses* squanders a decent premise. A black comedy about the breakup of a YUPpie marriage is a good idea; it affords the opportunity to criticize YUPpie acquisitiveness and materialism.

Unfortunately, director Danny De Vito and writer Michael Leeson focus instead on the couple's irrational, vindictive behaviour. This could have worked if De Vito and Leeson had empathized with the

Roses. However, they view the couple's behaviour from the outside.

De Vito and Leeson include a running commentary by a family friend who cautions us endlessly on the dangers of acting as the Roses do. We can't laugh at the events because we are constantly being reminded of how harmful they are. This commentary cripples the film, even if we are ultimately grateful for it because of De Vito's performance.

Turner and Douglas fare much worse. Since De Vito and Leeson

parodies Hitchcock nicely, though obtrusively, and the parodic musical flourishes he includes are occasionally amusing. However, he's a real control freak, hung up on technique rather than content, and he refuses to get down and dirty. The film feels far too cold. Unlike *Heathers* or *She-Devil*, it doesn't work on any level.

The only black comedy made recently which escaped the moralistic trap was *Vampire's Kiss* (directed by Robert Bierman, written by Max Frye). The film is about

## They want to be hip, but offer traditional pieties

never empathize with them, they look like nasty psychos. The filmmakers have undercut their point by placing the breakup twenty years into the marriage rather than four or five as originally planned; there's nothing irrational about people growing apart after twenty years. In fact, it's totally logical.

De Vito and Leeson have structured the film very poorly. The battles between the Roses aren't scaled; they don't get grander or more ruthless. As a result, the film becomes very tedious very quickly.

De Vito is a competent enough director, even skillful at times. He

a YUPpie Don Juan, played by Nicolas Cage, who thinks he's a vampire. His psychosis results from being rejected by a woman; ordinarily, he rejects them.

Bierman and Frye present the character in graphic, frequently hilarious detail. It's quite unsettling, and often cruel, but at least it contains some honest emotions and observations; the filmmakers don't just waste our time complimenting themselves on how witty they are while dispensing pieties.

That's a lot more than you can say for the makers of *Heathers* (despite the obvious talent that went into it), *She-Devil* or *War of the Roses*.



From left to right, Meryl Streep, Ed Begley Jr. and Roseanne Barr in *She-Devil*. Let's face it: black comedy isn't what it used to be, if it ever was.



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