

Watershed December 2007 'Bobcast'

Dear reader...

I have to come clean up front: I'm a diehard Bob Dylan fan. That doesn't mean to say I'm not critical; I've been through the lows. The woeful film 'Hearts of Fire' comes to mind, and one particular live performance in the hazy 1980s where the whole show stopped for Dylan to say, "Maybe one day I'll get myself a proper band". Oooooops. Critical reappraisal, however, is underway with Todd Haynes' forthcoming 'I'm Not There', a portrait of Dylan - or rather a portrait of an idea of Dylan - from several oblique angles.

It first happened to me circa 1975 as an ill 12 year-old. Off school and knocking about the house, I pulled out a copy of Dylan's 'More Greatest Hits' and put on 'Just Like Tom Thumb Blues' - probably for the title, which sounded intriguing.

*When you're lost in the rain in Juarez
And it's Easter-time too
And your gravity fails
And negativity don't pull you through
Don't put on any airs
When you're down on Rue Morgue Avenue
They got some hungry women there
And they really make a mess outa you*

I've yet to work out whether it was the exotic sounding Juarez, the failing of gravity or the hungry women, but the images cascaded and I was hooked into the world of Bob Dylan aka Robert Allen Zimmerman aka Blind Boy Grunt aka Jack Frost aka Cate Blanchett (or was that Heath Ledger...?).

*Now all the authorities
They just stand around and boast
How they blackmailed the sergeant-at-arms
Into leaving his post
And picking up Angel who
Just arrived here from the coast
Who looked so fine at first
But left looking just like a ghost*

I was dabbling at reading Serpico at the time. It had just been adapted into a film with Al Pacino, and covered real life experiences of cop Frank Serpico and corruption in the New York Police Force. Isn't that what Bob was singing about, the blackmailed sergeant at arms? Also on television in the UK in the mid 1970s was a great detective series 'The Rockford Files', which had a weasely but loveable crook called Angel. It seemed to my young imagination that this was the very Angel Dylan sang about being left looking just like a ghost. This is the thing about Dylan's songs: they flow in and out of reality, even if it's just a fictional reality. They also, at their finest, shift narrative

perspectives and play with potential autobiography. At the start of the epic 'Brownsville Girl' he is reminiscing about seeing a movie starring Gregory Peck who was shot in the back by a young kid; by the end the singer may well be the kid that did the shooting. In 'Simple Twist of Fate' - *they sat together in the park, the evening sky grew dark* - the third person narration becomes more intimate and personal by the final verse.

*I still believe she was my twin, but I lost the ring
She was born in spring, but I was born too late
Blame it on a simple twist of fate*

The shifting perspectives are enhanced by fantastic storytelling, which hints at the lives of the characters.

*She looked at him and he felt a spark tingle to his bones
'Twas then he felt alone and wished that he'd gone straight
And watched out for a simple twist of fate*

What had he done that made him wish he'd gone straight?

Why, even Dylan's most famous song 'Like a Rolling Stone' begins with the all-time classic story intro:

Once upon a time in a land far, far away...

There is also a rich vein of the cinematic – allusions and influences – in his storytelling. Word has it that if you watch 'The Maltese Falcon' (or is it 'The Big Sleep'?), you have the basis of most of Dylan's songs. 'Brownsville Girl' or 'Simple Twist of Fate' themselves could easily be scenarios for films. Indeed, other word has it that Oliver Stone wanted to make a film of the Dylan song 'Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts'.

And so the prospect of Todd Haynes' forthcoming 'I'm Not There' is, well, for me, mouthwatering. It seems to me the great achievement of Haynes is precisely to avoid any standard biopic approach – the life of a great artiste triumphing over life's hazards and temptations – to explore the idea of Dylan through several characters. The shifting narrative perspective, character and persona also chime with the aesthetic of Dylan's writing.

As an aside, I find amusing the story that Dylan may well have spent (or indeed is spending) time under the multiple personality anonymity of the web, contributing provocation, misinformation and debate on various Dylan related websites. We will never know.

For me Todd Haynes, along with his contemporary Gus Van Sant, are two of the most interesting of American directors. Their careers follow similar trajectories as they both came out of the new queer cinema of the 1980s: Van Sant's 1985 'Mala Noche' brought him to the attention of a wider audience; Haynes' 1987 'The Karen Carpenter Story' - told using Barbie dolls - was a cult (and controversial) success. Haynes then went onto make 'Poison' based on the writings of French writer Jean Genet.

Since then they have both evolved fascinating bodies of work, with each moving in and out of the mainstream: Van Sant made 'Good Will Hunting'; Haynes made the wonderful 'Far from Heaven', an homage to the glorious melodramas of Douglas Sirk. Both are fascinated by fame and its effects – Van Sant's 'To Die For' is a savage portrait of the power of media and seductions of fame and, to my mind, features Nicole Kidman's finest performance. Haynes' 'Velvet Goldmine', about a fictional glam rocker (who might be modeled on David Bowie), was heavily criticized at the time but for me it was Haynes cutting his teeth on experimental narrative in preparation for 'I'm Not There'.

Both have worked with young, relatively new talent drawing out great performances: Van Sant with Keanu Reeves and River Phoenix in 'My Own Private Idaho'; Haynes with Julianne Moore in the woefully underrated 'Safe', which is a subtle, coruscating portrait of the decline of American civilization, as embodied in the character of Moore.

Van Sant's 'Elephant' is a powerful meditation on the terminal implications of a disenfranchised youth culture and he again explores this theme in his new film 'Paranoid Park' that follows the implications of a sudden, violent action in the life of a young skateboarder. Van Sant uses the elliptical technique developed to such great effect in 'Elephant' and, before you know it, you're looping back on the story – seeing it from multiple perspectives. Finally, 'Paranoid Park' was filmed by the great cinematographer Chris Doyle, who established his unique, fluid and sensual style in films by Chinese director Wong Kar Wai; there are some scenes in Paranoid Park where you are sure you are floating along with the skateboarders.

'I'm Not There' opens at Watershed on the 21st December
'Paranoid Park' opens at Watershed on the 28th December

That's all. But just remember, as Bob says... *Don't follow leaders, and watch out for those damn parking meters.*

See <http://www.watershed.co.uk> for more info.