

Coping with Guilt (A Film Essay on Wrongdoing and Resolution)

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In the study of three contemporary films from different parts of the world, the characters involved in the narratives are in turn affected by a central incident or tragedy that often leads them towards feelings of guilt and remorse. We will show how the inner frailty of such characters manifests itself in its own unique way in each film and often leads them on a separate path to understanding and even redemption.

In French director Alain Resnais' film Wild Grass (1), dentist Marguerite Muir has her purse and wallet stolen from her after shopping frivolously for a new pair of high heel shoes. By some random coincidence, George Palet, a married man with two grown up kids finds the wallet in a mall parking lot after getting his watch battery replaced. After turning the wallet into the police, George starts to show mild signs of obsession, leading him to investigate Marguerite's whereabouts and send her persistent letters. When George continues this erratic behaviour, Marguerite eventually sends police to his address, but later feels compelled herself to learn more about George, who she has to admit she has never met before in person. After finally meeting George by tracking him down on a particular night, she herself is hit by sudden emotions and feelings of mad attraction, leading her to stray from her busy work routine at the dental clinic and on a path where she starts to revisit the aerodrome again to pilot a small airplane of hers with both George and his wife Suzanne as her unexpected passengers.

In Russian film 12 (2), a group of twelve jurors meet in a school gymnasium to decide on a verdict involving a young Chechen boy who allegedly stabbed his stepfather, a retired Russian Army officer. After almost unanimously deciding on a guilty verdict initially, each of the twelve individually overturn their original decision to put the boy behind bars for murder, after realizing that the grown up youth was only 6 years old at the time and that it was more likely that a set-up occurred in the boy's living conditions by the danger and warfare surrounding the crime scene at the time of the stepfather's death. Each juror also have to come to terms with their own inner weaknesses and biases that also factor into their ability to properly decide upon the boy's fate.

In Israeli film Year Zero (3), we are given a glimpse into the intertwined lives and struggles of a set of characters living in Tel-Aviv. In one narrative, real estate broker Reuven recklessly speeds in his car on a fateful night, hitting a blind man's guide dog and shamelessly leaving the scene. Later on, Reuven starts to regret his impulsive decision and seeks to redeem himself by trying to help Eddy find another canine companion to replace his dear dog Maxim. While Eddy pretends not to know that his new acquaintance Reuven was the hit-and-run driver, he lets the flawed man into his life and starts to forgive him while playing on some of Reuven's insecurities and shortcomings.

While the feeling of guilt often arises after a chain of events involving rash decision-making or mistakes of judgment in a time of crisis, within the narratives of the three films under study, affected characters later try to rectify a situation by first opening channels of communication, confessing their bias or trying to be more receptive to another's plight or suffering. Once these actions are taken, the people being wronged are in turn more receptive to the others' weaknesses and can move on along a more conflict-free path.

Sources:

1. Wild Grass (2009). Dir. Alain Resnais. StudioCanal. France. 104 min.
2. 12 (2007). Dir. Nikita Mikhalkov. TriTe. Russia. 159 min.
3. Year Zero (2004). Dir. Joseph Pitchhadze. United King Films Ltd. Israel. 131 min.