

"15 Minutes" Better Spent with the Television

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 13 March 2001 18:00

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15 MINUTES

Near the start of writer/director John Herzfeld's *15 Minutes*, two tourists-cum-thugs, the Czech Emil (Karel Rodin) and the Russian Oleg (Oleg Taktarov), murder a pair of acquaintances and torch their apartment, while the movie-loving Oleg videotapes the crime.

A couple of killings, and tapings, later, Emil hits upon an idea for getting rich quick: They'll videotape the brutal murder of a New York City celebrity, sell the footage to a *Hard Copy*-esque TV show, be declared insane at the subsequent trial (because only a crazy person would do such a thing), and make a fortune when book and movie offers start coming their way. With detective Eddie Flemming (Robert De Niro) and arson investigator Jordy Warsaw (Edward Burns) on their tails, the movie aspires to be not just a thriller, but a meditation on the nature of fame, the holes in our judicial system, and especially our American obsession with tabloid journalism, with television being singled out for particularly hostile indictment.

15 Minutes features a modestly clever premise for a thriller, but, in all honesty, this is absolutely the wrong time for any film to be turning up its nose at television. Without question, TV turns out more than its fair share of crap, but can anyone honestly say that the situation is worse than the one we currently face at the cineplex? Much as I try to discourage people from reading any film critics other than myself, I would guide anyone who cares about movies to Owen Gleiberman's

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review in the latest

Entertainment Weekly

, not for what he says about the film itself (which is also more than accurate) but for what he doesn't say about it. At least half the article is devoted to analyzing the vacuity of recent mainstream movies and cheering some amazingly good television work (

The Sopranos

and Judy Davis' magnificent turn in the Judy Garland bio-pic are singled out for special praise), and I understood exactly where he was coming from.

I've been writing about movies for the *River Cities' Reader* for six years now, and I've never had a tougher time composing articles than I have in the past few weeks; it seems that there's just nothing to write *about* these days. I

mean, come on:

Down to Earth

,
Sweet November

,
Saving Silverman

,
3000 Miles to Graceland

,
The Mexican

– these are the big, mainstream releases we're getting in the wake of

Hannibal

(which was also pretty poor, but worth more discussion than those other five films combined). I have to stifle a giggle whenever a film attacks television for its shallowness, but when movie audiences are faced with such mind-numbing choices as the aforementioned titles, you really have to shake your head in disbelief. Yes, TV execs are responsible for some truly bad, perhaps even dangerous, programming. But considering that you won't find smarter writing, in any of the arts, than you will on your average episode of

The Simpsons

, won't find sharper acting than the gleefully over-the-top yet carefully calibrated work Megan Mullally delivers every week on

Will & Grace

, and won't find anything that matches the brilliant orchestration and astonishing ensemble performances on

The West Wing

, television is hardly the source of all evil; filmmakers who rally against TV dumbing down our nation should shut the hell up.

Needless to say, *15 Minutes* does nothing to improve the current state of filmgoing. By the time

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you get to its main storyline, which hits about halfway through the picture, you've already sat through every witless cop-movie cliché in the book, and suffered through some laboriously bad plotting to boot. The pairing of the De Niro and Burns characters seems particularly lazy. There's no real reason for them to be collaborating on the case or, for that matter, sharing any screen time; you can almost hear the studio execs saying, "What crime-fighting duo haven't we seen on-screen before? A cop and an arson investigator! Brilliant!" It doesn't help matters that De Niro gives one of the least inspired performances of his career – withdrawn and terse, it would be charitable to say he's merely phoning it in – or that he's matched in the personality-free department by Burns, typically peevish and uncharismatic. (I'd say it was about time we saw him lighten up on-screen if I thought he was even capable of lightening up.) The supporting cast fares just as poorly; as the crooks, Rodin and Taktarov are appropriately sweaty but can't rise above their generic-psycho roles, and Kelsey Grammer, Kim Cattrall, and Melina Kanakaredes are stuck with horribly drawn characters. (Do these stars of *Frasier*

,
Sex & the City

, and

Providence

agree with the film's "TV sucks" thesis?) And for those who are keeping track, Charlize Theron shows up in a cameo, undeterred in her quest to appear in every motion picture released from now until the end of time.

But, to be fair, it's impossible to assess how any performers could inject life into Herzfeld's work. He tries to prove his cutting-edge directorial style by filming large portions of the movie through Oleg's camcorder – using black and white, solarization, the works – but these tricks have been done to death for years; visually, *15 Minutes* looks 15 minutes ago. He also appears to be in severe need of an editor (even though Steven Cohen gets a credit for fulfilling an editor's duties); just about every scene seems to go on many minutes longer than it should. And while Herzfeld deserves credit for a rather shocking plot twist about two-thirds of the way in, the characters' subsequent reactions to the twist are devoid of human reality and just make them seem even dumber than they seemed before. The movie, every so often, looks like it wants to kick itself into a higher gear, but it fails through its depressing blend of cliché and ineptitude.

And so, the movie drought of 2001 continues. Next week, my space will be devoted to analyzing the forthcoming Academy Awards. That's sure to be a refreshing change of pace, not just for the genuine excitement of the Oscar race itself (could anyone have predicted a more poetically juicy battle than the one between the *Gladiator* and the *Tiger*?) but because it'll be a reminder of the occasional good that can come from Hollywood. It also means that you'll be spared more reasons to avoid the cineplex. For another week, at least.