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The Sunset Limited

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The Sunset Limited

Abstract

This is a film review of *The Sunset Limited* (2011).

“I yearn for the darkness. I pray for death.” These are the despairing words of White, one of only two characters in Cormac McCarthy’s blistering play *The Sunset Limited*. Produced as an HBO movie directed by Tommy Lee Jones, McCarthy’s play is a theological dialogue that recalls Jean-Paul Sartre’s claustrophobic classic, *No Exit*. Like Sartre’s play, *The Sunset Limited* comprises just one act, and takes place in the confines of a single room. But McCarthy’s play-cum-movie is set in an apartment in a “black ghetto in New York City” (as the stage directions specify), and pits White, played by Jones, against Black, played by Samuel L. Jackson.

As the movie opens, we find that Black has miraculously swooped in to save the life of White, a suicidal college professor who had intended to bring about his demise by throwing himself in front of the eponymous train. Deprived of his entry into the longed-for void of death, White, a resolute atheist whose faith in culture “went up in smoke in the chimneys of Dachau,” attempts to withdraw from Black’s apartment and from the conversation that his born-again interlocutor relentlessly pursues. If one finds in White an iteration of Sartre’s famous dictum “hell is other people,” for Black other people are the very possibility of heaven; “you must love your brother or die,” he says. And having saved White’s body, he now focuses on saving his soul.

The dialogical dance that ensues behind Black's apartment door is vivid and engrossing. Black—a former convict who heard the voice of Jesus from a hospital bed while recovering from wounds sustained in a prison fight in which he crippled a fellow inmate—offers theological insights deriving from his admittedly “simple” vision, informed and sustained exclusively by the ‘Good Book’. The quintessential man of naïve faith, Black, patting the Bible, claims that “I aint got an original thought in my head.” Black's vision, if simple, is powerful, and his unschooled intellect is as sharp as his faith is strong; for much of the movie, it seems that Black's good will may win over the erudite White.

But White's disdain for humanity is thoroughgoing, and his loss of faith in the cultural artifacts that once sustained him is irreparable. White's despair issues from “a gradual loss of make-believe.... A gradual enlightenment as to the nature of reality. Of the world.” In stark contrast to the optimistic stance of Black, who is very much his brother's keeper, White's only hope is for a “nothingness” that will decisively cut him off from the humanity that he “loathes.”

Black and White are, of course, racially coded names, and one might find in the movie another example of the “magical negro” complex (as elaborated by Spike Lee). Black, like an “emissary of Jesus” and “guardian angel,” magically appears to rescue White, a Caucasian in need of salvation. But McCarthy undercuts

the expectations that attend this stereotype when, for example, White thematizes the question of the instrumentalization of others in narratives of redemption.

Perhaps the movie's greatest source of power lies in McCarthy's this-worldly theological vision. White scorns the supernatural, and though Black claims to know only that which has "the lingerin' scent of divinity to it," this divinity is rooted in the present world. "Life everlasting" has nothing to do with a posthumous heaven; the "forever thing," as Black calls it, is found in turning toward others, accepting the 'Word' that allows one to "ladle out benediction" on one's brothers. "And if I said that there aint no way for Jesus to be ever man without ever man bein' Jesus," Black says, "then I believe that might be a pretty big heresy."

For all Black's hope, however, *The Sunset Limited* is bleak, and like Plato's dialogues, nothing is fully resolved, leaving the task of continued conversation to the audience: Is the bleakness here due to White's refusal to accept the 'Word', or the rightness of his stance? Whatever the case, White's excoriating hymn to death will likely leave the viewer, like Black, crumpled. The camera zooms in on Black's stricken face as dawn breaks through the window behind him. But far from a sign of hope, the rising sun here brings to mind the damning words that White has just brought down upon Black before escaping the apartment: "I'm the professor of darkness," he intones grimly, "the night in day's clothing." For White, there is an exit from the hell of his "enlightened" world: the black nothingness of death.