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Henry Poole Is Here

Abstract

This is a review of *Henry Poole Is Here* (2008).

In the small-scaled, but powerful film, *Henry Poole Is Here*, director Mark Pellington shows us the life of Henry Poole (Luke Wilson), who is living out what he believes to be his last days with a sombre, alcoholic, and utterly depressed attitude. Mr. Poole, a diseased and dying middle-aged man who has completely given up on himself and sees living as a series of meaninglessness, coincidental actions and reactions, chooses to buy a house in a small urban setting to live out the rest of his days. However, his quiet, dreary life becomes anything but when his nosy neighbour, Esperanza (Adriana Barraza), one day sees the face of Jesus Christ on his newly completed stucco wall. This, of course, sets events into motion and soon the entire neighbourhood is lined up outside his home to touch the face/wall, in a drastic attempt to be healed from their physical ailments. Henry Poole, however, does not see a face and no matter how hard those around him try to convince him it is there, he denies it. Belief, or perhaps more importantly, hope, does not exist in Mr. Poole's worldview.

Pellington, who also directed *Arlington Road* (1999) and *The Mothman Prophecies* (2002), is not overtly trying to offer a Judeo-Christian theme in his newest film. While it is the face of Christ that is supposedly appearing on the wall and not another face associated with another religious belief, such as Buddha, there is no specific evangelical message here; no "my religion is the right one" ideology. There are however, universal, spiritual and humanistic themes, most prominently

being the power of belief and hope. Whether or not the face of Christ is actually on Mr. Poole's wall is irrelevant, but what is intriguing is how Pellington demonstrates the importance of belief in something that can offer hope. Indeed, this is a common, necessary element in Christianity. Without belief in something that offers hope - that offers more than meaninglessness - Christianity loses its primary purpose.

The film does not attempt to argue semantics, but it does beg to question - what is the difference between belief and hope? Throughout history, many Christians have placed hope in futuristic events, where belief is more centered on the present. For example, in Christian theology, one believes in the always immanent presence of God, but hopes for the day when God sets all things 'right.' However, often what happens is that hopes become transformed into beliefs. The hope that God returns, bringing pure justice, has worked itself into a belief in most Christian systematic theologies. Christianity must struggle with this complexity and alteration of hope into belief. Pellington, through his direction, indirectly asks the question, 'at what point does religious hope become a religious belief?' He makes people ponder what saves them - belief or hope? What is more important to Christians - having a belief in something or having hope in something?

Mr. Poole eventually does come to see the importance and place of both belief and hope, but not before many setbacks. The more people believe they are healed or transformed from touching the wall, the more cynical about the wall,

Henry becomes. At one point, in complete anger and agony, he exclaims to a crowd who has gathered at his wall, “Hope isn’t going to save you. You all understand that? It can’t save you, or her, or her, or him. You understand that? Hope isn’t going to save you! You know that.”

By the end of the film however, Pellington has made his case for the power of hope, almost trumping the power of belief. In one scene, Henry completely tears apart Esperanza’s religious beliefs, claiming that she wants to convert him not for his sake, but because it will negate the little bit of doubt in the back of her mind about her own beliefs. This scene implies that belief will always hold doubt closely, never allowing the other to stray too far. Yet when Pellington deals with hope, he shows it as free, unbarred, and liberating. Henry does touch the wall, not because he believes it will save him, but because he hopes it will.

There is also an existential dimension to the title of *Mr. Poole Is Here*, but Pellington doesn’t focus his energy on endless intellectual debates. Instead, he points the camera to the more vulnerable and emotional side of his characters and explores what it means to ‘be here,’ now. Even the music in the film entices people to become emotionally attached to the characters. Done in this fashion, with the investment in the emotionality rather than the intellect, Pellington is able to capture the attention of not just religious viewers, but also those who have no religion, but are looking for meaning in their lives.