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Kevin V. Dodd

Watkins College of Art, Design, and Film, doddblair@bellsouth.net

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Beatriz at Dinner

Abstract

This is a film review of *Beatriz at Dinner* (2017), directed by Miguel Arteta.

A lot of ink has already been spilt writing about *Beatriz at Dinner*. It is a complex film that resists a single interpretation, but critics have followed only one line, and have shown no understanding that there is another. They don't see religion as important unless a movie is directly about it. So they see the dinner party as political and moral, and generally disapprove of the ending. The clash between Beatriz (Salina Hayek), a serious but gentle New Age healer, and real estate tycoon Douglas Strutt (John Lithgow)—even his name sounds like Donald Trump—lacks enough nuance for them and the film's conclusion is either too ambiguous, too tragic, or just a “cop-out.” But what if the focus is elsewhere: on a struggle between two popular religious systems?

Beatriz, a Mexican immigrant, hence raised Roman Catholic, surrounds herself with New Age, eclectic spirituality. She is a healer. Not like a doctor, but as a holistic therapist. She massages her patients first by moving across their auras to locate their physical ailments and then honing in on those areas specifically. She works at an alternative healing center which deals mostly with cancer patients where she, besides giving massages, provides sound therapy to aid their meditation and has them do breathing exercises. She advocates herbal and dietary remedies for illnesses. She is an empath: she encounters dead animals, even in pictures, and experiences the pain they felt in their death throes. When massaging she can gain a picture of the moral stature of a person, as when rubbing Doug's shoulders and she sees blood spreading out in water.

She sees the world not in terms of its independent individuals but in terms of its interconnections, especially between the wellbeing of humans and the health of nature. She therefore places her hopes in “old souls” to heal the earth, which is suffering from a human-induced cancer. She keeps an icon of the Buddha on an altar for meditation and burns incense as she sits there; she has a picture of the Virgin Mary hanging from the rearview mirror in her car

and a happy Buddhist bobble-head monk on the dash. And, as we see at the end, she believes in the Christian message of vicarious atonement, i.e., that an innocent person can take the place of the guilty and, by self-sacrifice, save them and heal what they have done.

Strutt embraces the religion of neo-liberalism. He gleefully espouses Social Darwinism, survival of the most competitive. The world is composed of winners and losers, according to their abilities to bend political decisions to their short-term economic interests. He thrives on challenges, and confrontations are almost erotic for him. He enjoys environmentalists who protest against him as he acquires new properties, and then demonstrate outside as he razes the area in preparation for another hotel, entertainment, or shopping complex. He holds to laissez-faire capitalism and the privatization of government. “Greed is good” as the mantra went during the Reagan Administration.

He is not, however, cruel or sadistic. He is simply indifferent to consequences outside his self-interest—the pain of others and the destruction of the environment. They are “externalities.” So in the quest for expanding his “dynasty,” as he calls it, he has been guilty of illegal dumping and contaminating land preserves. He thinks a good title for his memoirs would be “Life is a Game and I’ve Won.” He hunts “big game” for fun: he stalks and waits, he stares the beast in the eye and feels something primal, and then he shoots it dead. Nature is all “red in tooth and claw” to him. That’s just how things are. Beatriz shouts at him that all his pleasures are built on others’ pain.

The dinner, of course, occurs on his own turf, as he is celebrating with his dependents and sycophants another victory over government regulations and popular opposition. Among them, he is full of humor, bravado, and self-indulgent wit. He is having a good time. Beatriz, on the other hand, is nothing if not humorless. A life of healing is serious business to her, as it

generally is to prophets. So as the night wears on, she moves between personal attacks and attempts at reconciliation, until she just gives up on the latter. She seldom looks elsewhere; she glowers at him. Strutt, on the other hand, mocks her and dismisses her positions, but does not disapprove of her company. When in a fit of anger she throws his cell phone across the room and stomps out of the room, he waves it off. “Everyone’s not like me, thank God.” He gives her some pretty sound advice from his perspective at the end: everything is dying—human beings and the earth itself; she ought to enjoy herself; not everything is sad.

Beatriz admits that she has always felt her fate was to heal, but it might have been something else—to locate the source of suffering and eliminate it, kill it. She stares at Doug as she says this and he is only too aware of what she is saying. But he takes it in stride. She is brokenhearted about all the woes of the world, and tired; she wishes she were back home with its lake and eddies and its mangrove trees. But her home is gone forever. A developer like Strutt bought the land and built a hotel and a golf course on it. The villagers were sent off in poverty and his venture lasted only a year.

She finally comes close to her own “big game” safari, with Doug as the prey. She takes a letter opener and stands about fifteen feet from him, imagining herself thrusting it deep into his throat until he is dead, then cradling his head until they are discovered. However, she drops the weapon and walks outside to leave. A short distance away, she has a vision of the interconnection of selfishness—a neighbor breaking her goat’s neck because it bothered him and Strutt’s exploits—and decides to pursue the other route of solving the problem. This is where we are faced with the ambiguity of the film’s conclusion. She walks into the Pacific Ocean outside of Newport Canyon in Southern California.

Critics see this as an act of despair, and they have good data to back that up. But that would mean that men like Strutt win; that they wage a war of attrition against their adversaries and eventually triumph. So she gives up. This, however, ignores her religious nature. From her Christian background, her confrontations with Doug take on the function of prophetic proclamations, like Jesus' against the Pharisees, and her outbursts become like his overthrowing the tables of the money changers outside the temple. Her suicide at the end, ignoring the church's pronouncement that it is a mortal sin, would then be meant to be like his death—an act of self-sacrifice and redemption. As she dies in the surf, she envisions the wholeness of nature, represented in the waters of her youth. Meanwhile Strutt is having fun sending off small flaming wish lanterns across the dry chaparral, indifferent to the possibility of igniting a raging fire. Fire and water. But not like yang and yin.

The real question at the end, then, is whether her act of self-sacrifice will work. Is her religion more powerful than that of this proverbial Pharisee and money changer? Is it really able to redeem the man and help heal what he has done? We do know her spirituality is effective in her healing. She is called “a miracle worker.” So maybe it will. On another level, in the myth of Jesus he did not directly overcome his adversaries or their institutions. Rather he began a movement that outlasted them, at least as they were at the time. So, on this other level, can her environmentalism and holistic healing outlive the individualist and self-serving religion of late capitalism and save the planet before it is too late? Will her death help fuel the progressive movements and help ensure their longevity? It is a gamble she is willing to take.