

Looking for an “American Downton” at the Nichols Library

The other week, the Nichols Library looked at British films with a similar flavor to *Downton Abbey*: rich ensemble casts, novelistic scope and an upstairs-downstairs storyline. It was observed that there are few American counterparts to those films. Well, obviously, our melting-pot culture is never going to yield up that kind of utterly proper and oh-so polite manner in which the Crowley’s carry on, and the existence of a serving class has become less prevalent in the states (though there are reports that it is making a comeback). Still, a country as large and diverse as ours would seem to provide enough source material for a nuanced, multi-character film that explored the edges of those divides. Here’s a look at why Hollywood doesn’t often go there and which films are most *Downton*-like in scope and content.

For starters, there aren’t as many ensemble films made in the states. Hollywood is attached to the star system for marketing films. Be it a romantic duo (Meryl Streep and Tommy Lee Jones in *Hope Springs* or Nicholson-Hunt in *As Good as it Gets*), a buddy flick (from Nick Nolte and Eddie Murphy in *48 Hours* to Jackie Chan and Owen Wilson in *Shanghai Noon*), or a solo vehicle (Claire Danes in *Temple Grandin*), it’s all about the stars. The rest of the cast tends to be peopled with *characters*, as in broad character types (*One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* is a good example, *Tropic Thunder* a not so good one). When Hollywood does cast an ensemble film, it often uses second-tier stars in cameos. Two good examples are *Crash* (best picture, 2005), which featured Sandra Bullock, Don Cheadle, Matt Dillon, and Brendan Fraser, among others. *Traffic* (4 Oscars) featured Michael Douglas, Catherine Zeta-Jones, Amy Irving, Benicio del Toro, Dennis Quaid, James Brolin, Don Cheadle (again!) and Salma Hayek.

What about the upstairs-downstairs angle? The prevailing theme in the states is not about the tensions of living within a class niche, but in getting to the top and trying to stay there. Joel and Ethan Coen’s movies get this. *The Hudsucker Proxy* tells about a mailroom clerk with big ambitions (Tim Robbins) who rises to the top and falls back to the bottom (almost). In *Fargo*, the rags-to-riches motif leads to crime when car salesman has his wife kidnapped so he can extort ransom money from his in-laws. Thirties screwball comedies such as *The Philadelphia Story* and *Bringing Up Baby* pitted the un-moned (Jimmy Stewart, Carey Grant) in a battle of wits with their social betters (Katherine Hepburn, in both instances). One film that did explore the idea of being stuck in a social niche was *Breaking Away*, in which four high school buddies who aren’t going anywhere are living in a college town full of preps who are and know it. When one of the townies becomes obsessed with cycling and re-invents himself as an Italian, the fun begins...

So what is the most *Downton*-like of American films? Crime dramas! Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather* took Mario Puzzo’s novel and turned his novel about mob boss Vito Corleone into a film epic. The movie’s scope novelistic, embracing the Corleone family, its associates, mob rivals, and sundry police, film Mughals, pop stars and politicians. The character portraits show characters of considerable psychological depth. The depiction of Corleone’s as

"royal family", complete with servants and retainers and loyalties is socially complex, as its nuanced treatment of crime as 'business.' Finally, in the character of the Don, who 'refused to be a fool, dancing on the string held by the big shots' and lived to make his son 'the one that pulled the string,' you have a tale about ambition and power that corrupts.

Other contenders include *American Gangster*. This story about a street enforcer (Denzel Washington) who develops Viet Nam connection and becomes a drug kingpin, explores similar themes but lacks *The Godfather's* scope. *The Soprano's* has a wider scope of characters but lacks the breadth. *The Wire*, an HBO drama about a running drug investigation told from both the perspective of the police and the street, has it all: character, scope and complexity. The series nails the hierarchies at the precinct and in the high-rises in all their complexity. At the heart of the story is Lt Daniels, who runs the investigation. He is caught between his ambitions (and his wife's), the demands of his boss's in the department to kill the investigation, and his own instincts as a 'good police.'" Dinner, however, is not at eight, carryout is the menu, and drinks at the corner tap, not brandy in the lounge, follow. How all American is that?