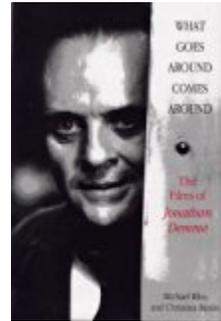


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael Bliss, Christina Banks. *What Goes Around Comes Around: The Films of Jonathan Demme*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996. x + 176 pp. \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8093-1984-8; \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8093-1983-1.

Reviewed by George Bagley (University of Central Florida)
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Directorial Conflict

Any text that attempts an explanation of the dance sequence in Philadelphia—a depiction of the “preternaturally heightened ... awareness of one’s distance from life” in the face of imminent, though expected, death—must have something going for it. That stated, Michael Bliss and Christina Banks’ book, *What Goes Around Comes Around: The Films of Jonathan Demme*, certainly holds forth an interesting promise. Their central object seems to be bridging the vast diversity among Jonathan Demme’s films, films as various as the admittedly exploitative *Caged Heat* and the humanistically sensitive Philadelphia. It is a clearly daunting prospect; union among diversity; oxymoronic though intriguing in scope. Bliss and Banks valiantly pursue their stated intent with careful analyses, but their implied object of union finally remains, sadly, as elusive as it originally appears.

The text itself is forthrightly divided into a clear introduction and chapters that address one, at times two, of Demme’s individual films. Each of these chapters is pleasantly insightful, most often with ample support for the authors’ positions. Demme is an impressive cinematic force due to his concern for humanistic issues, his sensitivity to the newest upbeat music and his fascination with darker subjects, all exhibited in his various films. This is an effective section, clearly written with quiet, unassuming prose, and is a pleasant indicator of the literary tone of the following pages. At points Bliss and Banks indeed satiate the expectation raised. Chapter One, for example, an examination of Demme’s “exploitation” films, effectively subordinates the exploitative qual-

ities in these films to Demme’s humanistic concern. No small task considering their apparently polarizing content. Gratuitous female nudity, the authors explain, also comprises the film’s social message by drawing attention to women’s subjugation and victimization by men.

Bliss and Banks extract the same ethic from Demme’s film, *Melvin and Howard*. Melvin Dumar’s actions connect to Demme’s overarching humanism through the clear link the authors construct between Dumar’s faith and his eventual abandonment of Hughes dream, his rejection of the ideal of money in favor of the consequences and possibilities of human interactions. Melvin is at heart an idealist. By revealing his profession of the Hughes will’s existence, Melvin “unleashes the wild dogs of avarice and marketing mania in a lust for money,” an unintended outcome Melvin does not anticipate, and one which finally reminds him that what is important is not money, “but what happens to people.” That firm belief, Bliss and Banks contend, points to Melvin’s, and the director’s, unswerving faith in people’s essential goodness.

Demme’s own faith was forged, it seems, in the embers of directorial conflict. He emerges wounded, though loyal to his own idealism, from his ideological/aesthetic confrontation during the production of *Swing Shift*. The authors’ characterization of Demme’s film and Goldie Hawn’s final distributed version is notably interesting, but well constructed, referring to Demme’s stated intent with the film counterpoised to the print finally released, the former a probing examination of “the ways

that American women at the time of World War II were limited by their prescribed roles,” and the latter subordinated to Hawn’s purported concerns for her character’s sympathetic depiction.

Still, there are indications rather early in the text just how elusive this kind of direct support will be. For example, an alternate thesis arises in the second chapter that begins to cloud the clarity of Bliss and Bank’s original position. This new thesis deals with the fragmentation of society and family that leads ultimately to chaos and, consequently, Demme’s particular resolution through emergent social and familial order. Though this second position could arguably connect to the notion of humanism by virtue of its appeal to society and family, nevertheless, fragmentation, chaos and emergent orders embark the reader upon new territory, something beyond direct depictions of human goodness and faith.

This idea resurfaces in chapters three and six. Thus *What Goes Around Comes Around* seems finally bifurcated. Bliss and Banks refer late in the text to what they state they have stressed throughout—the ultimate measure of Demme’s success—but their claim implies the kind of rigid unity their writing does not always exhibit, an

obvious gap between stated intent and what actually occurs. The difficulty here seems tied into the text’s structure of individual films addressed in individual chapters. This kind of divisiveness does not promote unity, particularly with such diverse works as Demme’s. Given that structure, the only apparent workable strategy must be a single clear thesis that indeed maintains the desired union between the various films and chapters, one that dominates and subordinates all subsequent writing. As the text stands, the presence of an alternate thesis, its bifurcation, stops short of that kind of clarity and unity. Overall, *What Goes Around Comes Around* is an interesting book with plenty of careful insight, though ultimately a testament to the difficulty of collating the works of an individual whose creative expressions are so diverse.

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