

FILM

“WENDERS AND INARRITU : INTRIGUING VIEWING”

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Wim Menders' "Don't come Knocking" (USA/Germany, 122 mins, colour, 2005) has a plot, set in the rocky and mountainous land of Nevada—the grand space of "Paris Texas", and earlier of John Ford films, Howard Spence (Sam Shepard), an illustrious star of western films, simply rides out of a film set, one early morning in Nevada. The actor has disappeared on horse back, and Camp Railem is in disorder. A search of the mobile camp trailer reveals only ladies' intimate garments. The night open spaces are lit by a fireside, bringing into focus satellite dishes. Howard acquires fresh clothes, in exchange for his cowboy attire, spurs, saddle and horse—but keeps his hat. In the desert outback he searches for cars and trains; and walks along rail tracks. To facilitate the search for Howard, an overhead helicopter arrives at the film location. At small town cafes, Howard is fastidious that he might be recognized, and gets involved in petty quarrels. A police car halts Howard for an identity check, Howard drives away, and speaks to his mother, Lulu (Eva Marie Saint), near the Nevada border. At a bar, the singer sings. He is a lonely man. Howard draws cash from a bank till, throws away his cell phone, and boards a bus for Elco.

Travelling on a bus, Howard puts on fresh stockings and shoes. Simultaneously, the young actress on the film set refuses to perform before the cameras, in the absence of Howard. Howard feels the need of his mother. At the bus stop, mother Lulu awaits son; and Howard greets his mother with plastic roses. Elsewhere, a young girl has collected the ashes of her mother, in an urn. She visits a graveyard, and places flowers on the ground. Howard feels her mother has to hide him, just like "Jesse James". Things have been coming up like a snow ball. The film insurance company is searching for Howard, while Howard shouts and throws his clothes around, mother Lulu stares on a play station. The guitar with strings, which Howard used to play, has been preserved, Lulu has built a cut and paste album of newspaper reports on Howard's films, reviews, breaks with law, love affairs, drug addiction, and alleged links to Miami vice. As Lulu watches baseball on TV, Howard takes a walk in town. He gets absorbed on electronic gambling machines and casino betting. He beats up Cliff, a starer, who has spotted him. Even the restaurant guard gets punched. Police arrive, and take Howard, under hand cuffs to the police station. Howard discloses his identity of having done a lot of westerns. Police escort him back home. Meanwhile, Sutter (Tim Roth) an insurance detective, knocks at Lulu's door, and Lulu denies keeping Howard. At breakfast, Lulu informs of a grandson. A woman, from Montana, had telephoned about pregnancy.

Howard had not been in Montana for thirty years. He leaves for the Sanotooth mountains, in search of the girl who rang up from Montana. He speaks to mother Lulu, on phone. Sutter, the insurance detective has again visited Lulu's residence, Howard is back in bed with girls picked up from a restaurant, He sits at a bar,

which has displayed an early film poster of Howard, “Just like Jesse James”. The girl, Sky (Sarah Polley), with the ash urn spots Howard, from the film poster. She had been looking for Howard, and tried to track him all over. At another restaurant, Howard discovers Doreen (Jessica Lange), his love of thirty years ago. She was earlier a bar girl, now owns the restaurant Doreen points to the hotel crooner, Earl (Gabriel Mann) as their son, After Earl’s singing is over, Howard follows his son, Earl accuses Howard of trailing him. There is a scuffle, and Earl drives off. Sky, the girl with the urn, observes. Next morning Sky throws stones at Earl’s first floor apartment windows, and says she would like to talk about his father. But Earl is in a bad mood, and pushes away his girl friend. Howard meets ex-lover, Doreen in the restaurant, and sees himself in his son, Earl confronts his mother, and she confirms. The son does not want to believe, and wants to know why Howard has come back, Doreen cries.

Earl gets violent, and breaks up his furniture and guitar. Sky visits Howard, in his hotel room, holding her mother’s ashes. Collecting Earl’s address from Sky, Howard visits Earl, when Earl has been throwing away all his furniture, Howard punches Earl, who no longer cares about his music system and belongings, Denying his father, Earl sinks on a couch by the roadside. He sleeps on the couch at night, and does not want to be related to anyone. A revolving camera records the family disarray. Howard had missed everything, cutting himself off, and did not know what was passing. He had nowhere to go. Disclosing her identity as Howard’s daughter, Sky requests him to stay in town, and make Montana a home, as he had need for a home. She scatters her ashes on a down hill slope. Next morning there is a reconciliation between Howard and Doreen, but not before Doreen calls him ‘Callous and a coward’, who would hide and disappear again. Sutter, the insurance detective, has been surveying Montana, with binoculars. He visits Doreen’s restaurant where East has composed a song on Howard, and confesses of void. As Howard drives off, a Red Indian shoots at the car tyres. He appears in a California Court for breach of contract time in the film shoot, and is put under hand cuffs. He gives the car keys, to son, Earl, and returns to the shooting call sheet.

Howard plays the hero of the film, set in Mexico of black deaths, crusades, and inquisition. There is a reconciliation between Earl and Sky, and they go for a drive in Howard’s car. The softness of the female characters—the mother, ex-lover and illegitimate daughter—stand in contrast to the brutality of the men, Howard and Earl, who resort to violence as a response to their unfortunate lives. As Howard’s family is reconstituted, Wenders reinvents John Ford’s landscape of Monument Valley. Scripted by Sam Shepard, who is also the protagonist, “Don’t come knocking” leaves the hero discarding his addictions, dislikes and cow-boy image.

The character is the actor, who abandons shooting of his new film, flees as far as possible, and rediscovers a part of himself, Franz Lustig’s camera pursues the landscape of anachronistic westerns and existential chronicles. The film was screened at the last Kolkata Film Festival (Nov. ’06).

BABEL

Atejandro Gonzalez Innarritu’s “BABEL” (USA/Mexico, 143 mins, colour, 2006) depicts destiny affecting certain people, who have never seen each other.

Four groups of people—in USA, Mexico, Morocco and Japan—are inflicted by a single event, in three continents. Abdul is roaming through the mountains of Morocco with his goats. To an arms dealer, Hassan Ibrahim, he offers 500 riyals and a goat, for a rifle and 3000 bullets, with the purpose to kill jackals. When Abdul is not in the village, his sons Ahmed and Yusuf tend to the goats and play with the rifle. Besides peeping through crevice and watching his sister, Zohra undressing, Yusef fires stray shots from his father's rifle. A jackal runs away. From a hill top, he shoots at a passing bus, on the winding road below. The bus is full of western tourists. Susan (Cate Blanchett) who is sitting besides the window, next to her husband, Richard (Brad Pitt), is hit on the upper chest by a bullet. She slumps on her husband's shoulders. Amelia (Adrianna Barraza), their maid in San Diego, who looks after their son and daughter, is discouraged to go on leave. But her son is getting married in Mexico. Communication is by cell phone.

The bus in Morocco halts in a village. There are no nearby hospitals, Richard contacts the US Embassy in Morocco, who feels it is extremists who have struck. Unavailable are qualified doctors in the area. Other bus passengers are restless over the delay to the bus. In Tokyo deaf and dumb girl players play indoor volleyball. Chieko (Rinko Kikuchi) a mute player indicates that they were dumped but not blind, to a disputed decision. In the players' dressing room the players agree that they should not have lost their tempers after losing the game. Widowed father Mr Wataya fetches Chieko from school, for an appointment with a dentist. Chieko is a lonely child. With other friends, she visits a restaurant. When boys trail her, she lifts her skirt and displays her underbelly without panty. The Moroccan boys remain at home, and do not take out the goats. Abdul returning to the village, informs that police are on the look out for the shooter who fired at the American tourist, in the bus. His sons maintain silence. Police were looking for the culprits. The bus is now driven towards a hospital, with the injured Susan. With the help of nephew, Santiago (Gael Garcia Bernal) at the wheels of a car, Amelia crosses the US-Mexico border, with Susan and Richard's children, for attending her son, Luis' wedding. The children, Debbie and Michael, play with the Mexican children, and watch a chicken being beheaded. As the bus winds its way, a doctor arrives in Tangier in Morocco. The doctor speaks Arabic. Through a translator it becomes clear that Susan's cervix is broken, but the bullet did not touch the spine. At the dentist's chamber, while her cavities are repaired, Chieko puts her hands on the dentist's crotch.

The shooting of the American tourist in Morocco becomes TV news. Tokyo's metropolitan police want to meet Mr Wataya, Chieko's father. Chieko pleads that her father was innocent of her mother's death, as she had jumped off from the high rise apartment balcony. Richard speaks to Susan's sister. Rachel on telephone and exchanges information. Brothers, Ahmed and Yusuf hide the gun inside a rock cave. Police check the surrounding villages. The cartridges are found, and the 270 calibre rifle is being searched. On interrogation, Ibrahim tells the police that he had sold the rifle to Abdul; and had earlier obtained the rifle from a Japanese excavator. When the police encircle Abdul's village, the boys panic, and fire sporadically. Ahmed is shot dead, and Yusuf fires at a policeman, Later he surrenders. Susan's children enjoy the Mexican wedding of Luis and Patricia, accompanied by music and dances. After the wedding, when Amelia is

returning with the children to the US border, driven by nephew Santiago, US troopers check the visitors. In panic Santiago shoots from a pistol and the children are frightened, Santiago drives furiously and drops Amelia and the children in the middle of a desert. Amelia leaves the children under a tree, and searches for help.

In the bus at Tanzarine, there is no air conditioning and no gas. It is hot and humid. An old woman in a village, offers an opium pipe to Susan. Chicko attends a rock music concert. Yusuf surrenders to the police. When police detective, Yasujiro (Koji Yakusho) visits Chieko's residence Chieko strips and tries to seduce him. Later her father confides to the police, that Chieko's mother had shot herself with a gun. It was also true that he had given a rifle to an Arab hunting guide, in Morocco. Children Debbie and Michael are lost, and Amelia trudges through desert and forests at night. There is a police chase over muddy tracks and Amelia is deported back to Mexico, after living in USA for 16 years. An ambulance still does not fetch up in Tanzarine. Susan's children are found. Villagers carry alive Susan in an open coffin, acting as a stretcher, as they spot a helicopter hovering. Susan is flown out.

The bus helper declines money from Richard. Charges are not pressed by Richard, against Yusuf. Susan is discharged from a Casablanca hospital. The parents and the children are united in San Diego. "Babel", the multiple language tableau has immense coherence. The fragmentation of the story does not collide between modern Tokyo and the Moroccan desert. The choice of transition from one continent to another, accentuates the tensions. An isolated gun shot has repercussions in three continents. The screenplay by Guillermo Arriaga determines the connections and the political implications. Rodrigo Prieto camera is of different formats and depth in the three continents, where documentary and colour spring out. The film was screened at the 37th IFFI in Goa (Nov./Dec. 06).

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