Rob Bauer

Robert West

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Towelhead

*Towelhead* is a movie about a teenage Arab-American girl, Jasira (Summer Bishil), from a different ethnic background growing up in the States. Her father, Rifat (Peter Macdissi), is from Lebanon and her mother, Gail (Maria Bello), is American. She is trying to identify herself when it seems everyone else in the movie is contradicting themselves.

Alan Ball wrote the screenplay and directed this movie. Ball appears to be acting as aueter for this film. He has used Peter Macdissi in his previous work (“Six Feet Under”), which would imply he had some control over who would be acting. I have seen bits and pieces of the series, “Six Feet Under,” but have not seen *American Beauty* (Ball didn’t direct *American Beauty*, but wrote and produced it). The Art of Watching Films states a good movie is “one whose every element bears the director’s trademark” . Ball, in my opinion, hasn’t directed enough works to really grasp his style. From what I have seen, style of lighting and camera angles appear similar to “Six Feet Under” and had a feeling of being made for TV, which I think stems back to “Six Feet Under” being a cable series and this is what Ball knows. Roger Ebert notes *American Beauty* and *Toewlhead* are two movies that feature “two suburban men obsessed with underage beauties” . Ebert also comments on “Six Feet Under,” saying it “specializes in acute embarrassment and spectacular misbehavior” which is also the nature of *Towelhead*. For example, Jasira feels she must shave her privates, which typically is a private event, although not once, but twice she lets another man do it for her. She’s embarrassed and doesn’t know better. The men know better and take advantage of the situation.

This film has humanistic qualities. It is a coming-of-age film where the viewer witnesses the life of a young adult going through puberty and dealing with the drama that goes with it. Based on the characters and film title, this would appear to be a film dealing with racism, which the title being a derogatory turn for those in the Middle-East. The film is more sexual than racial. The alternate title, *Nothing is Private* seems to describe one of the lessons in this film. Just about every character in the film is involved in Jasira’s business, her mother and father are understandable, but then neighbors and classmates get involved too. Eventually, another set of neighbors, Melina (Toni Collette) and Gil (Matt Letscher), befriend Jasira and present the other lesson: you don’t have to have sex if you don’t want to.

The opposite of humanistic approach is the emotional and sensual experience . The Art of Watching Films describes a good movie as one which evokes a strong emotional or sensual response. It describes fast-paced, action or adventure films as the preferred approach, since these are usually “hard hitting and direct” . In *Towelhead*, the film wasn’t fast paced. It did have an emotional impact. The impact, although powerful, didn’t help the film. Several reviewers noted this. For example,

“Towelhead keeps kicking around explosive signifiers and icky shock-value gotchas that Ball doesn't have a clue how to handle.”

Or Roger Ebert comments this plot is similar to one done before by Todd Solondz with “Welcome to the Dollhouse” (1995), and Ebert says,

“Solondz knew how to do it, what his intentions were, how to challenge us and yet involve our sympathy. Ball seems merely thrashing about in a plot too transgressive for his skills.”

To be more direct, Jonathan Richards comments,

“There is hardly a scene that does not produce exquisite discomfort and a strong desire to be somewhere else.”

Richards also notes that some people use this quality as a measure of a strong film. I believe good artwork provokes an emotional response, be it a good or bad response (a love it or hate it feeling), but this film’s implementation of the story doesn’t leave the viewer connected to the characters. Some reviewers have commented Summer Bishil’s acting was too flat and open to interpretation as to what the character was thinking. Others have felt the acting was very good and the movie’s flaw is the director’s lack of understanding of the emotional aspects of the material. Ball being male, is easily able to understand and project the male characters, although these are pretty easy: be racist and sex hungry. After watching the film a second time, I wondered if Lavinia Currier, who directed *Passion in the Desert* would have been a better director for this movie. She likely would have explored Jasira’s emotions as well as Jasira’s mother, providing the much needed context to explain why they were behaving the way they were. Not to say it wouldn’t be possible for a male director to do so, (Todd Solondz seemed to do so, although I haven’t seen his film), but a female director would have very likely gone through what Jasira has gone through and would be able to dig emotionally deeper than Ball has in *Towelhead*.

Overall, *Towelhead* seems to be split almost evenly . It is well liked by some, and disliked by others. The reason it would seem for liking the movie is the strong emotional impact the movie has with its viewers. Those who don’t like seem to dislike it because the emotional impact is almost constant in every scene. I think the actors did a flawless job and mechanically the movie was excellent. The lighting and framing was good and the camera use was excellent and creative. I agree with other reviewers who felt the constant barrage of disgust was a bit too much without any supporting context.

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