

Film review of *Phone Booth* (2003)

Directed by Joel Schumaker

Starring Collin Farrell, Forest Whitaker, Katie Holmes, Radha Mitchell, Kiefer Sutherland

Rated R

Length 80 minutes

Summary

Stu Shepard (Farrell) is a media consultant whose bark is worse than his bite. Basing his business on lies and subterfuge, he even lacks scruples in regard to his marriage. Stu is working on graduating one of his cuter clients, Pam (Holmes) into mistress status. (She doesn't know he's married.)

After calling Pam from the usual payphone (so her number is not detected on his cell phone), Stu picks up the phone again when it rings. On the other end is a patient-voiced man who turns out to be the voice of fate. Soon Stu realizes that the voice belongs to an off-kilter sniper who seeks to force confession of deceit and lust out of him and deliver an execution bullet as just punishment. Stu cannot leave the phone booth, tell the crowd or the surrounding police what is really happening to him, and he cannot fast-talk his way out of this fatal deal.

Review

Stu is cocky, dishonest, glib and brimming with pretense and propped appearances. Barely disguising his Bronx upbringing, Stu seems to have convinced himself that he can convince others that he has everything "together." Farrell fills the role perfectly within the film's first few moments.

From the moment Stu enters the phone booth the stage is set: the film takes place only here till the end. This is where he will be prodded and manipulated and taunted by a conscience-like voice. As tension mounts, the prisoner begins to crack under his plight's weight. He must appease this maniac to avoid getting shot. But appeasement is futile. The voice wants *confession*.

The film thrilled me with its perfect tension and convincing pace, its sense of disorder and moral importance. The shit hits the fan for a man not only blinded by his own ambition and conceit (which is old plot hat) but also for his dishonesty in marriage and love. Another film that portrayed the poison of wanton infidelity well was Adrian Lyne's *Unfaithful*, unlike the infidelity-praising situation in Clint Eastwood's *Bridges of Madison County*.

Stu is not wholly ruined by his excesses and lies. Somewhat early in his ordeal he starts to realize his folly, quite apart from the impending doom upon him. His realization is genuine; it takes on a life of its own. Despite the voice's threats and excruciating demands, Stu learns that his confession and repentance are crucial for his *soul's* redemption aside from his body's safety, regardless if he survives or loses his life in that phone booth. When Stu accepts this, so does the viewer. Farrell managed an amazing, moving performance in this particular development that marks him as a formidable actor. Reckoning visits the protagonist and salvation is won - and the accurate prospect of a lunatic being needed to defend fidelity and honor is a sober comment on our times and confused culture.

What better endorsement can I offer but to make my own confession: *Phone Booth* made me weep – and it continues to have such an effect each time I watch it. Especially when Stu breaks down, looks right at his bewildered wife in the witnessing crowd of onlookers and police, and says, "I've been dressing up as something I'm not for so long, I'm so afraid you won't like what's underneath. But here I am...just flesh and blood...and weakness."

Film review of *Max* (2002)

Directed by Menno Meyjes

Starring John Cusack, Noah Taylor, Molly Parker, Ulrich Thomsen

Rated R

Length 108 minutes

Summary

Max Rothman, a one-armed, Jewish art dealer in 1918 Germany, meets a disheveled, disgruntled, desperate artist named Adolf Hitler. Max lost his right arm in WWI and returned to immediately resume his art appreciation, promotion, and sale. Passionate, insightful, opinionated and kind, Max is a wellspring of culture in a country sapped of its identity, pride and, seemingly, its future.

Obscure and homeless, Hitler contacts Max and requests his aid in finding exposure for his work. Max urges the narrow-minded man to "go deeper" with his creativity, to loosen his drab realism and mine his more "voluptuous" energy. The film follows the day-to-day life and interaction of these two polarized characters. Hitler falls into the budding anti-Semitic crowd that eventually becomes the National Socialists, while Max advises him to avoid such foolishness and pursue his art.

The film's trailer slogan is officially "Art, Politics, Power", but I say it should be "what might have been," as it is repeated a few times in the film. Young Hitler has a choice before him: choose art and creation or bitter politics and destruction.

Review

At the reopening of his art gallery (set in an old ironwork), Max tells his mistress that he needs to see her again and she remarks, "Where's the future in it?" Max says, "I've seen the future...There's no future in the future." *Max* is full of such unwitting, ominous statements. Another example: Max's friend is rudely received by Hitler and consults Max.

"What's his name?"

"Hitler."

"Never heard of him."

"You will."

Chilling, indeed, yet the previous quote is much more thematic and important: "There is no future in the future." Along with "what might have been", this is a telling statement in regard to the advent of Nazism and Germany's subsequent brainwashing.

Cusack masterfully plays Max, the ever-curious, ever-passionate artist who must accept his own lack of painting ability due to his missing right arm. Max is progressive and modern, yet he is an anachronism in disgruntled, depressed Germany. The War Guilt Clause in the Treaty of Versailles has castrated the military men and offended the citizenry, including German Jews. Max is beyond politics, disillusioned by the War, eager to seek and foster and celebrate "newness" instead of regret and vengeance.

Noah Taylor fills Hitler's role frighteningly plausibly. Weary, pining for past war glory, unsung and unsuccessful, 30-year-old Hitler considers *himself* to be progressive and modern. He seeks a "cultural revolution" in art and dreams of escaping Israel's "God of guilt," gradually shaping his spite for the Jews. But he also expresses belief in a powerful State: "I don't believe in anti-Semitism," he says to fellow barracks residents. "The Semitic question is far too important to be left to the individual. It ought to be in the domain of the government, like public health or sewage." These opinions are appreciated and exploited by military proponents of National Socialism, seeing in Hitler a gift for oratory and hysterical simplification of seminal ideas that later sent European Jewry to the death camps.

As Hitler fumbles for help from Max, Max reiterates his advice to direct frustrated energy fully into art, to find his own "authentic voice." Hitler's current work contains no verve, no deepness. Hitler must dig deeper. And after that, according to Max, "deeper still!" Though Hitler needs Max's expertise and networking, the two are always at odds, disciples of different Ways. Hitler's staunch intolerance for caffeine, meat, cigarettes, hanky-panky and alcohol is in constant tension with Max's excessive smoking, preference for strong coffee, taste in art and erotic infidelity, for example. Max is always flipping open his lighter and smoking another cigarette as Hitler winces and frowns. The smoke is a visible, wordless affront: a free and invasive essence that Max boldly displays and shares, making no apologies.

Max's unfaithfulness to his beautiful wife perturbs me, but the film depicts a man in love with *love* – and sensation and good feelings. Max Rothman is very much like Oskar Schindler, as depicted in *Schindler's List*: suave, cultured, cool, attractive and prone to stray from monogamy. Max has money to spend, friends, variable interests and optimism, while Hitler has nothing. Hitler, in his shabby state, cannot even attract one girl. Again and again *Max* contrasts the men's stations in life: Max's refined home and family opposed to Hitler's street tramping and makeshift art studio in a filthy barn.

Many clever allusions and elements throughout the film come to mind as illustrative. The fact that Max is missing his *right* arm and sustains his *left* (their respective political wings), Max's ironic assessment of Hitler as a Futurist, Hitler's recurring resistance to politics and even anti-Semitic oratory, Max solemnly regretting the loss of his arm while attempting to draw a perfect circle with his remaining limb (contrasting Hitler assaulting his canvas and stabbing it repeatedly with his brush before collapsing to the floor), and Hitler calling the caging of birds "inhuman" and referring to some people as "guttersnipes" (the same insult Churchill used for *him* in reality). Perhaps the most poignant device is a sign held up for an audience to ponder after Max and friends conclude an anti-war performance: "WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN."

"What might have been" indeed. Though the film takes many fictional liberties to tell its tale, it's essentially cogent. If a multitude of circumstance had been otherwise, if Max's encouragement had steered young Hitler successfully toward art excellence, if Max had not lost his arm. If, if, if, might, might, might. However, Hitler tells Max that he has finally found his "authentic voice": "Go deeper, you said. Well, I went deep. I am the new artist, practicing the new art." That art is propaganda, rage and hatred. "Politics is the new art," Hitler boasts smugly.

Near the film's end, Meyjes alternates focus between a searing, hateful speech to a packed auditorium and a whispery Jewish Blessings of Peace. While Hitler leads the room in an outraged chant of "Blood Jew," Max admires his father as they quietly speak their prayers.

We all know what the real Hitler chose. *Max* plays with truth-based fictions perhaps to make another attempt at understanding *what might have* contributed to the man's descent into brutality. It also – thankfully – presents Hitler as a *human being* with human pain and resentment and dreams. History has molded Hitler into a cartoon demon, which the complexity of such a development. There are glimmers of niceness about the portrayed Adolf, but they are lost as he staggers into his destiny – for what at first? Want of money and support by the military? Anger at personal failure? An intensified scapegoating against Jews? Disappointment at his impeded art?

Also, I wonder why Germany later accepted the Nazis. Can things get so bad and hopeless that normal folks can be lulled into such a regime? Certainly. Then and now and from now on. If Hitler hadn't been available, another useful figurehead would have been coached. An anecdote mentioned at a meal with Max's family is illustrative. Max tells of a woman who deliberately swallowed a tapeworm so she could lose weight. This, of course, repulses his father, but it strikes me as something potentially symbolic. Might a people knowingly swallow a dangerous thing because that thing seems worth the risk to change a current affliction or depressing situation?

Since I must conceal the film's conclusion so as not to spoil it for folks who have yet to watch, I'll close with a final example of Hitler unfortunately missing Max's insightful instruction. Max: "We all shit the same, scream the same, and die the same." Adolf (scowling): "There's no need for vulgarity, Rothman."

Film review of *The Chronicles of Riddick* (2004)

Directed by David Twohy

Starring Vin Diesel, Thandie Newton, Colm Feore, Judi Dench, Alexa Davalos, Nick Chinlund

Rated PG-13

Length 159

Summary

26th Century. Riddick (Diesel), a wanted criminal and ruffian, has been hiding from bounty hunters for five years (since his adventures with a shipwrecked crew and ferocious monsters in *Pitch Black*). After turning the tables on a sleazy merc named Toombs (Chinlund), Riddick flies to Helios Prime, a planet under siege by an imperial force known as the Necromongers, to seek a former friend who might have leaked his refuge to the mercs. He learns that he might be solely instrumental in opposing the powerful Necromongers who are led by the almost invincible, half-dead Lord Marshal (Feore). The Necromongers go from planet to planet, offering total conversion to their way or total demise. The Necromonger's heaven, the Underverse, is promised. Riddick's uniqueness is due to his origin as a Furyon, an almost extinct race prophesied to produce the one who could defeat Lord Marshal.

Although reluctant to dive into this galactic conflict, Riddick acts on an inner spark of justice. Recaptured by Toombs, he is incarcerated on a sun-scorched, prison planet called Crematoria - where the surface temperature shoots to 700 degrees Fahrenheit at sunrise. Of course, the circular, tiered prison is waaaaay underground, guarded by slimy, crooked goons. Riddick allows his imprisonment because he knows a former friend from *Pitch Black*, Kyra (name changed from Jack), is kept there. Kyra has become hardened by prison life and has learned to kick ass. Meanwhile, Dame Vaako (Newton) entices Vaako, Lord Marshal's right-hand man, to seize rule when Lord Marshal is weakened. After a series of insane situations, comic-book-like violence, and cliff hangers, Riddick makes it back to Necromonger-occupied Helios Prime to finally deal with Lord Marshal.

Review

"Accept the Night, and the friendly Dark..." - Dionysos, The Bacchae

Eleanor Gillespie of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* said of *The Chronicles of Riddick*: "Riddick-ulous. Vin Diesel and director David Twohy should be ashamed of themselves." Although I like how she stated her disgust, I must disagree. I found *Riddick* to be quite entertaining, dazzling and downright clever in some spots. Just when I thought the film would be a blockbuster stinker, it took a second breath and sprinted to a satisfying (albeit predictable) conclusion. Well, an open-ended conclusion.

I disliked Twohy's *Pitch Black*, which I found somewhat dull despite the interesting Riddick character. *Chronicles* alludes to *Pitch Black* and clunky exposition provides a connection for those who seek continuity, but the film stands on its own.

Riddick, aside from possessing great strength, fighting prowess, baritone-voiced charm and being an unpredictable crosspatch of a person, has the extraordinary ability to see clearly in the dark (hence his success during the month-long night in *Pitch Black*). Riddick also is an outcast, a bull-headed loner who can be as unscrupulous as he is deadly.

Granted, Riddick's criminal repertoire is a lot to overlook, but we've cheered for the Godfather and Tony Soprano, countless conmen and mobsters, the Wild Bunch, and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. Riddick is a familiar heroic composite, possessing the resourceful endurance of Odysseus and the brutality of Conan the Barbarian. He also embodies messianic importance: evasion of the massacre of his people as a child, prophesied to be the one man to save the universe, one who conquers death itself.

Riddick's special sight and his impure dealings link the character to darkness, which is his natural environment, his comfort zone. When Riddick slides the goggles off his eyes, the audience can safely bet he's about to take action and turn the tables on his enemy. So we hope for – cheer for – light's failure during crucial scenes. And, of course, astute viewers will be reminded of three key mythic mythfolk: Apollo, Artemis and Dionysos. The film's besieged and occupied planet is called Helios Prime; and the sun-dominated prison planet, Crematoria, is infamous for its deadly sunrise. Helios obviously comes from the same name of the Greek sun-god who descends from Hyperion. Another name familiar with sun/light is Apollo (often confused with Helios), whose surname is Phoebus ("brilliant").

Sister to Apollo is Artemis, the moon goddess. A huntress, she also is the goddess of wild things. Riddick *is*, undoubtedly, a wild thing. He remarkably tames a ferocious beast in the Crematoria prison, explaining that "it's an animal thing," for example. Later myth connected Artemis to Hecate, goddess of darkness and the underworld. Like Riddick, her allegiance to good or evil is ambiguous. These aspects also apply to wily Dionysos, who can be both kind and ruthless, identifies mainly with darkness and is the god who suffers. According to myth, Dionysos defied death by resurrecting and braving the underworld to rescue his mother. Riddick, likewise, deliberately descends into Crematoria's subterranean hell to free a former friend. He also resists Lord Marshal's ability to tear souls from bodies.

Another redeeming aspect of *Chronicles* was the noble depiction of people maintaining their various religious faiths. "There will many theological references, even if I am agonistic," director Twohy said before the film premiered. "Religion has a very important role in the history of the mankind, and also in the way people are built." When faced with the Necromongers' Inquisition-type ultimatum, folks stand firm and reject diluting their respective faiths into a rather meaningless conglomerate. The Necromongers' appeal? Different religions *cause* perpetual conflict! Why not surrender to a peaceful way?

Though an outsider, though one who most likely couldn't care less about such matters, Riddick becomes a violent thorn in the Necromongers' side. Like Frank Miller's Batman, he chooses to oppose the homogeneous order instead of sacrificing the rocks and rolls resulting from freedom.

Many fight scenes are confusingly edited, sometimes obscured by rapid, flashy editing. At first I disliked this method, but I finally decided that this mimicked a comic-book format, simulating the selective blows and parries shown in sequential frames. The special effects satisfied me without overwhelming me, the early attack on Helios Prime is spectacularly frightening, and the Necromonger martial methods are quite weird (even Lynchian). Also, the set designs and art direction are splendidly sinister and rich, sharing the old world/new world mixture that seems to fit science fiction so well.

The actors? I've loved Vin Diesel since *Saving Private Ryan* and *Boiler Room*, and his repeated testimony about his humble beginnings and lifelong love for acting, along with his recorded enthusiasm for the Riddick character, impresses me. Colm Feore as Lord Marshal bothered me because I couldn't shake his Linoge role in Stephen King's underrated *Storm of the Century*. Thandie Newton, as Dame Vaako, is stately and sexy. Alexa Davalos is full of piss and vinegar, but her role is ultimately gratuitous. Another flimsy, unnecessary role is Judi Dench's Aereon the Elemental. How is Dench in the role? Well, she's...Judi Dench.

With delightful echoes of *Dune*, *The Road Warrior*, *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*, *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Conan the Barbarian* – even Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*, *Chronicles* delivers a cool treat for sci-fi fans. Sure, some clunky scripting and boring cliches pop up, but the film surprisingly entertained me, even ringing that mythic bell I'm such a darn sucker for.

Want another tidbit to help you risk your ticket fare to see *The Chronicles of Riddick*? Consider a scene between Riddick and an antagonistic inmate in the Crematoria prison. Challenged by the inmate, Riddick holds up a tin teacup and calmly says, "I can kill you with my teacup." The inmate mockingly asks, "What?" And Riddick says, "I said, I can kill you with my teacup."

Do you think Riddick can? Do you think he does?