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Author(s)	Joy Gould Boyum
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Now Appearing: Agony, Urban Blight and Death

By Joy Gould Boyum

"Promises in the Dark" traces the prolonged death by cancer of a 17-year-old girl. "Natural Enemies" centers on a man who wakes up one morning and decides to do away with himself and his entire family. "Boardwalk" deals with the terrifying problems of an elderly couple as they confront not only the traditional problems of age, but racial tension and urban blight as well.

That's entertainment? Well oddly enough, it could have been. For if each of these current movies focuses on a variety

On Film

"Promises in the Dark"
"Natural Enemies"
"Boardwalk"

of agonizing experiences, this doesn't necessarily mean that they have to be agonizing experiences themselves. After all, pain and suffering are legitimate subjects for art and in truly tragic works end up exalting rather than depressing us. But transforming human pain into aesthetic pleasure is no mean task. It's precisely this transformation that none of these films manages to effect. The miseries they present carry with them no insight, no new perspective, no credible solution or, in other words, no persuasive justification for exposing us to them in the first place.

In the case of "Promises in the Dark," for example, we are left to wonder to what end director Jerome Hellman and scenarist Loring Mandel have put us through the horror of watching a lovely young girl (Kathleen Beller) die of cancer. And die, moreover, bit by bit as we watch her lose her hair, have her leg amputated and end up comatose, her life sustained only by machine. Certainly it cannot be to tell us what we all know already: that such death is truly terrible. Can it be, then, since the film also spends a good deal of time dramatizing the girl's growing involvement with her physician (Marsha Mason) to explore the doctor/patient relationship? This hardly seems likely. For if the aim is only to show us the wearily predictable sight of a cold, mechanically professional woman being humanized by a warm, young patient, we surely don't need so extreme a vision of the process of dying.

Or can the purpose be to argue in favor of euthanasia? The film, after all, ends with the doctor disconnecting her patient's respirator. Still, it seems doubtful. For its final scene notwithstanding, the film doesn't really argue the case at all. For one thing, it totally ignores the results of the doctor's actions—importantly, she has gone against the wishes of the girl's parents. For another, it supplies the doctor with a highly personal motive (a "promise in the dark" to her patient), thus making simplistic and sentimental hash of a highly complex moral question. What then is the point of it all? An exercise in audience torture?

Which is what "Natural Enemies" seems to be as well—albeit of a different sort. Here we spend the entire film, if not with a girl in physical torture, at least with a man with a tortured soul. Played with unrelieved grimness by Hal Holbrook, he is a successful publisher who, on the day we meet him—which promises to be the last of his life—contemplates killing himself and his entire family. A large part of what makes the film so draining is that we are never given a satisfactory explanation as to why.

We follow this man throughout this crucial day, as he talks with acquaintances (writer Jose Ferrer and analyst Viveca Lindfors), as he recalls past moments with his wife (Louise Fletcher), even as he visits a brothel. But none of these scenes, undramatically written and statically directed by Jeff Kanew, truly illuminates the sources and nature of the man's angst. Neither does the lengthy monologue he delivers in voice-over throughout the film. Indeed, the sum total of our knowledge about this man is: a) that his marital sex life is bad, so bad that he and wife have agreed to sleep together only when she is asleep, and b) that his children annoy him by reading comics and eating sugar cereals. Could these be sufficient grounds for suicide and murder? Perhaps. But we cannot believe it and worse, deadened by the film's tedium and pain, we cannot care.

Unlike the protagonists of "Natural Enemies," the aged hero of "Boardwalk," played by Lee Strasberg, has no sexual problems at all. In fact, he and his wife of 50 years (Ruth Gordon) have a terrific time in bed. Otherwise life is terrible. His Coney Island neighborhood is disintegrating, with muggings, robbery and rape having led most of his friends and neighbors to move away and a few others to commit suicide. His family is falling to pieces, with his widowed daughter (Janet Leigh) having entered a loveless marriage; with his grandson, a rock musician facing mother and girlfriend problems; and with his beloved wife having developed cancer. And business in the old cafeteria is terrible.

Clearly, in this case, the problem isn't that our hero's miseries are unexplained. Rather it's that they are overstated, over-simplified and banally rendered by director/scenarist Stephen Verona and his cast. Nor is the issue that our hero doesn't take arms against his sea of troubles. It's that his way of dealing with the mostly black and Puerto Rican street gang who serve as the greatest symbol and source of his troubles is both implausible and offensive. Attacking the attackers, he becomes a geriatric vigilante.

So what is happening to our movies? Are they—in a change of pace from all the juvenilia and frivolous nonsense they've offered us of late—trying to be serious and mature? And have they mistaken misery for maturity? Or, are they merely trying to exploit some current concerns? Whatever, they certainly have begun to traffic in agony; but unable to transform that agony into art, they are inflicting it on us instead.