Apr 13 FILM / Finding the Sacred Among the Profane: The Black Dahlia / Sean Woodard

Film (/2017-posts/category/Film)

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During this Covid-19 home quarantine, I've been able to catch up on books and films I'd been meaning to read and watch. Mainly, I've been binging film *noir* for a blog post I published for the Frida Cinema called "*Noirantine*" (https://thefridacinema.org/noirantine/)—yeah, I know, it's a punderfully catchy title (don't hate me). This led me to pull down

from my bookcase a novel I began reading years ago but didn't have the time to finish: the first entry in James Ellroy's "L. A. Quartet": *The Black Dahlia* (1987).

As an undergraduate, I purchased a lot of hard-boiled crime novels and detective fiction by James M. Cain, Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Walter Mosley, and others. Encouraged to branch out by my friend and former professor Michael Dean Clark—you should read his past "One Perfect Episode" essays here at *Drunk Monkeys*—I also picked up Nina Revoyr's *Southland* and Ellroy's novels. Having loved Curtis Hanson's adaptation of *L. A. Confidential*, I sought out Brian De Palma's 2006 version of *The Black Dahlia*. And, well, it was majorly disappointing to say the least. A second viewing from a cheap DVD copy I found in an FYE store was more palatable, but still left a bad taste in my mouth.

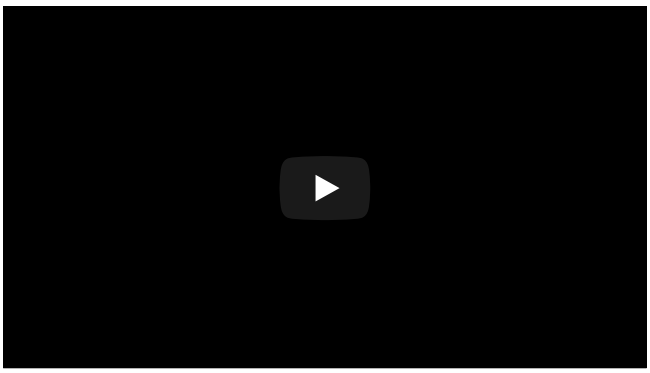
Fast-forward to today and I can finally come to terms with the film adaptation after having finished reading the original novel. To me, *The Black Dahlia* did for Ellroy what *The Shining* did for Stephen King—they allowed the authors to delve deeper into their craft and the psychology of their characters, while wrestling with demons of their own. For King, that was his own battle with alcoholism and detailing the backstory of Jack Torrance's relationship with his father to create an arguably more layered character arc. For Ellroy, the reason was much darker. In terms of the novel, Ellroy could have ended the fictionalized narrative at the conclusion of Part II with the mystery of Elizabeth Short killer remaining elusive and a relatively sentimental ending for its characters Officer Dwight "Bucky" Bleichart and Kay Lake; however, he continued down the rabbit hole of obsession for his characters to discover a plausible culprit for the slaying and satiate the author's psychological merging of Elizabeth Short with skeletons from his closet.

In his autobiographical True Crime book, *My Dark Places*, and in a 2006 *Virginia Quarterly Review* essay entitled "My Mother and the Dahlia" (https://www.vqronline.org/essay/my-mother-and-dahlia) (which was reprinted as a new afterword to *The Black Dahlia*'s movie tie-in edition), Ellroy details the brutal 1958 killing of his mother Geneva Hilliker when he was a young boy. The unsolved case led him to the Elizabeth Short, infamously dubbed "The Black Dahlia."

About the novel he writes, "It was a salutary ode to Elizabeth Short and a self-serving and perfunctory embrace of my mother. I acknowledged the Jean-Betty confluence in media appearances and exploited it to sell books. My performances were commanding at first glance and glib upon reappraisal." He later notes how their influence on his life and writing has changed him and "convinced me to pull Jean back from my personal dramatic arc and let her test still in my heart."

At the time of the film's release, Ellroy commended Brian De Palma and the crew for creating what seemed to him the most accurate depictions of his books for the silver screen. Released during awards season with a strong advertising campaign by Universal—capitalizing upon the "From the director of *Scarface*" connection (another Universal property) for the film's tagline—the film garnered a Best Achievement in Cinematography Oscar nomination for the late Vilmos Zsigmond (*The Deer Hunter*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*). Critics, on the other hand, were brutal in their assessments. *The Black Dahlia* was one of the worst reviewed films of the year and had disappointing box office returns for the studio.

Revisiting the film for a third time shortly after finishing the novel revealed to me that De Palma's adaptation is not a terrible as critics and I initially thought. It is nowhere near the director's best work, but is far from his worst pictures. Zsigmond's cinematography stands out in capturing the essence of *noir* films from the 1940s and '50s. The crew's eye for period detail is astonishing accurate and feels at home with the era it tries to recreate. The film has some other nice touches, including a rousing musical number by k. d. lang. But as a whole the film doesn't hold up. Despite good chemistry between Aaron Eckhart and Josh Harnett as detective partners Lee Blanchard and Bucky Bleichart, Hilary Swank's portrayal as a *femme fatale* has been criticized by critics as a terrible miscasting. In addition, the streamlining of Ellroy's plot creates jarring editing choices that affect pacing and reveal holes in narrative logic. Despite two sweeping sequences that can be considered among De Palma's best examples of dramatic action—(1) a sweeping crane shot that reveals the discovery of Elizabeth Short's body shortly before a shootout occurs nearby; and (2) a shadowed setup that ends with a fatal multi-story tumble into a fountain below (see below; warning: SPOILERS)—*The Black Dahlia* fails to be as compelling and immersive as it wants to be.



One element the film portrays well is how it details the spiraling obsession with the Black Dahlia murder case. Blanchard's focus on the crime threatens to derail his relationships with Bucky and Kay (Scarlett Johansson). On the other hand, Bleichart's love affair with Dahlia-lookalike Madeleine Sprague (Hilary Swank) leads him to withhold evidence, while a shocking turn of events shakes his understanding of morality.

By utilizing suggestion, the film occasionally gets under the viewer's skin. As with Spielberg's *Jaws*, the "monster" isn't fully shown until near the end; in this case, the grisly visuals of Elizabeth Short's mutilated body. Details are hinted at throughout the narrative in dialog and the autopsy scene, most notably the hideous grin disfigurement of her beaten face that recalls *The Man Who Laughs* (1928). The fact that her body was cut in half, drained of its blood, and its intestines and sexual reproductive organs removed are mentioned and briefly glimpsed in reproduced crime scene photos. But De Palma saves a full view of the corpse for a brief look-away-and-you'll-miss-it moment in some of the film's final shots. For more details on the Short case, you may find facts and photos from the actual crime scene online at various sites devoted to True Crime and unsolved murders.

One thing I'd like to briefly touch upon is the subject of Bucky's backstory, an area that the book excels in detailing but that the film sadly fails to do. This results in a more satisfying character arc. Gone from the novel are details that raise questions about faith's role in the preceedings. The discovery of Short's body was allegedly the most gruesome news sensation since the conclusion of the horrors of WWII. The fact that it got more attention than the Holocaust in the late '40s and early '50s shows how sensationalized the case was at the time. It was as if people asked, "How could God allow such a terrible thing to happen to this young girl," while the suffering and execution of the estimated 6 million Jews was a more immediate and harrowing matter that was the general public either overlooked or were ignorant about until the Nuremberg trials reintroduced them to the public consciousness.

Ellroy inserts references into his novel that don't translate to the film adaptation. While Bucky's relationship with his father is glossed over in the film in a brief scene, the book explores the tenuous relationship and Bucky's morality further. Dwight Bucky Bleichart secured position and rose quickly through the ranks of the Los Angeles Police Department by providing evidence against two Japanese-American officers. The information resulted in them being shipped to a Japanese interment camp in California. This action plays into the flawed patriotism of the war era that was imbued with racist ideologies.

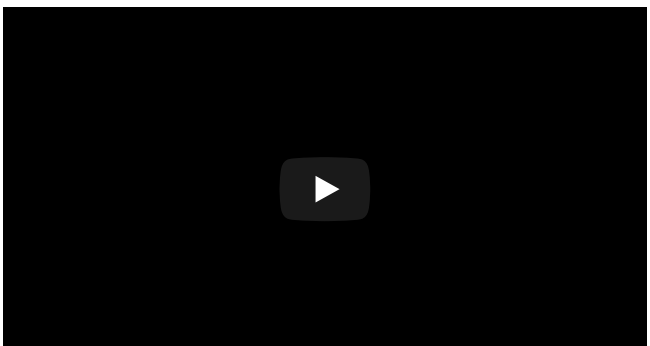
The notion of patriotism is further mired by Bucky's relationship with his father, who was a German immigrant to America prior to the war. Bucky's snitch job was a way to divert attention away from his father's espousal of Hitler's ideology. Bucky is a terrible son wracked with guilt for hardly visiting his father, who suffers from dymentia, in the nursing home he left him in. In one scene, Bucky confronts his father, yelling for him to speak in English. His father responds adamantly in German. Bucky breaks up the argument by redirecting his father's attention to a model German warplane that he hasn't finished. His father's mood visibly

changes to one of interest and affection for the incomplete project. The well-being is his father's medical attention and housing needs are what cause Bucky to throw the LAPD boxing match against Lee Blanchard. By betting against himself he is able earn enough winnings to pay off old debts and secure a better facility for his father's care. Ironically, he locates one where "Most of the oldsters at the home we're Jewish, and it pleased me that the crazy Kraut was going to be spending the rest of his life in an enemy camp." In retrospect, the comment may be construed as politically incorrect to contemporary audiences, almost as insensitive as Jake Gittes's inquiry about "people of the Jewish persuasion" at an assisted living facility in *Chinatown* (1974).

Another detail that fills in Bucky's character arc in the novel is his Calvinist background. In his essay "My Mother and the Dahlia," Ellroy describes his mother as a "midwestern-Calvinist rectitude and Saturday night cut-loose girl. She lived in that misalignment. It engendered a desperate unhappiness and killed her." The familial faith background that informed Ellroy's upbringing is peppered into Bucky's backstory in the novel. This further complicates his moral center. It posits him as a good person whose obsessions influence him to do bad things. Bucky is presented as a lapsed Christian. The only time he seems to invoke God is in instances of convenience. A couple of times he says a quick prayer to the "Calvinist God of [his] childhood" in hopes that His intercession leads to a relatively positive outcome. Despite his lack of faith, the teachings he acquired from his catechesis inform the parts of his morality that compel him to do what is right in the grand scheme of things, even if it means he must take a fall for his actions.

Unfortunately, these elements are absent from De Palma's film adaptation. While it helps keep the occasionally unwieldy backstory and plot manageable for a 121-minute movie, it leaves Bucky's psychological and moral motivations for his decisions vague. As a result, Josh Harnett's portrayal of Bucky comes across as occasionally skirting cardboard-thin characterization.

Despite its flaws, *The Black Dahlia* retains some merit through some of the examples I listed above. However it misses the opportunity to be a bracing exploration of the human psyche, as well as to answer the question why people are drawn not only to the Elizabeth Short case, but also the dark avenues of human compulsion.



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Sean Woodard serves as the Film Editor for *Drunk Monkeys* (http://www.drunkmonkeys.us/), a staff writer for *Horrorbuzz*

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