

Requiem for a Dream (US 2000): style or substance  
Director: Darren Aronofsky  
Producer: Eric Watson and Palmer West  
Screenplay: Hubert Selby Jr and Darren Aronofsky based on Selby's novel  
Director of Photography: Matthew Libatique  
Editor: Jay Rabinowitz  
Production Design: James Chinlund  
Music: Clint Mansell  
Cast: Ellen Burstyn, Jared Leto, Jennifer Connelly, Marlon Wayans

Adapted, by director and author, from Hubert Selby Jr's cult novel, *Requiem for a Dream* offers a vision of drug addiction that goes beyond the usual fixation with illegal drugs to take in 'junk' television and diet pills. Cross-generational addiction features to draw attention to the bleakness of American existence – the road trip 'down south', which founders upon racist bigotry, gives the tale a particularly American character.

Whether it was the critique of American society, or the visceral representations of drug taking and the orgy, that led the industry regulators to offer only an NC-17 certificate for the film is unclear. Independent distributors Artisan rejected the certificate, which signals commercial death in America as, in an example of economic censorship in the 'land of the free', many publications won't carry advertising for films with that rating and Blockbuster won't stock the video. It took just over \$3.5m at the box office in North America but has built a reputation as a cult movie after video release; the Internet Movie Database currently has it as the 56<sup>th</sup> greatest film based on user's votes.

From the perspective of style Aronofsky certainly doesn't eschew 'intervening' in the script:

It runs on a flurry of split-screens, extreme close-ups and rapid edits (the average feature boasts between 600 and 700 cuts; this one has 2000). The result is highly impressive: a swooping gut-churning assault on the senses, all underpinned by Clint Mansell's mesmerising string score. (Brooks, 2001, p. 49b)

It seems from this extract that Brooks liked the film, however he concludes:

Technically brilliant, the finale still reeks of cynicism. One is left with the impression that the preceding 90-odd minutes was just the loving arrangement of dolls in preparation for a mammoth toy-smashing session. (Ibid.).

While Brooks doesn't explain his dislike very well he does seem to suggest that the style of the film is ultimately shallow. In addition to the stylistic devices noted above, Aronofsky deploys fast motion (Sara Goldfarb's 25 second speed-driven cleaning session took 30 minutes to shoot) and, what he calls, 'hip hop montage'. This consists of extreme close ups, with a rapid rhythm to the editing, of drug taking; including both heroine and coffee. For example a sequence of 13 shots includes the following:

putting joint in mouth  
lighter  
chemicals  
lighter lighting  
chemicals (heroine) bubbling  
syringe filling  
pupil dilating  
joint in mouth  
lid with bubbling liquid splashing out  
cooking up in lid  
syringe in  
heroine in veins  
eyes dilating

This is accompanied by a 'hypersensitive' soundtrack that offers the aural equivalent of the extreme close up. The question is whether such expressionist devices are appropriate to the narrative or merely flash, mannerist, packaging. Given that drugs offer 'altered states' then it is appropriate that the visuals

used to convey them should break conventions; just as William Burroughs' prose style is possibly best understood when stoned.

The visual pyrotechnics still allow Ellen Burstyn to shine in a performance of immense power and it's good to see the 'new generation' of actors, Leto and Connelly, get involved in such 'risky product'. As the poster hints with its image of her looking out to sea, *Requiem* is referencing her role in *Dark City* (US 1998) a film that also dealt with shifting realities. However, whilst love redeemed the characters in the earlier film, Aronofsky-Selby's morality tale is unremittingly bleak. So while it is easy to despair at the pap produced by profit-seeking Hollywood, the American independent sector can still produce fascinating movies; see also *Donnie Darko* (US 2001).

Xan Brooks (2001) 'Requiem for a Dream' *Sight and Sound* vol. 11 issue 2, February