

The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r

An independent weekly internet magazine
dedicated to the movement for economic justice,
social justice and peace - Providing commentary,
analysis and investigations on issues affecting
African Americans and the African world.

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January 15, 2009 - Issue 307

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Film Review: Revolutionary Road By Eric Mann

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Drama. Starring Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio. Directed by Sam Mendes.

"Revolutionary Road" is an important, gripping, must-see film. The dynamics between April Wheeler (played by Kate Winslet) and her husband, Frank Wheeler (played by Leonardo DiCaprio) are painfully and vividly gripping. This is the tragedy of suburbia and women's oppression inside the suburban, nuclear marriage. It is the tragedy that would have befallen the lovers of the Titanic had not Jack Dawson (Leonard DiCaprio) met his icy demise and instead married Rose DeWitt Bukater (Kate Winslet) and time traveled with her to suburban Connecticut in the mid-1950s.

The starkness of white suburbia gives me chills. I am an avid fan of "Mad Men," the present TV series on AMC, and it too creates a terrifying déjà vu. I grew up in the white suburbs, Valley Stream Long Island, from 1949 through my college years at Cornell in 1960. It was the great escape from Brooklyn, the move to what our neighbors called "the country."

This was the period of the GI Bill, when liberal Democrat Franklin Roosevelt created the greatest social welfare program in history to reward the soldiers who had fought against Hitler and Fascism. (Roosevelt also extended the scope and power of the American empire.) For the first time, houses could be bought with loans of 15 years or more, at interest rates that were subsidized and tax deductible. My parents bought a house for \$13,500 in 1949 and the interest was 1 %. The housing boom and the bank lending boom were only made possible by the highway boom, the great achievement of the Eisenhower years when federal dollars were spent in the biggest post-war investment in infrastructure, in support of suburban developers and the auto industry.

The end result was that people could afford the little boxes on the hillside made of ticky tacky that all looked just the same in the plan of Levittown. They could work in downtown Manhattan, and then commute by car or suburban commuter rail from Long Island, Connecticut, or Westchester. This is the suburban sprawl that has led us to a world of pollution, global warming, an auto fetish - to the one-house, two-car, 2-and-1/2-kids road to consumption, alienation, and anomie.

Frank Wheeler and April Wheeler begin as winners but soon find themselves terrified captives of the American Dream. They buy a beautiful house in the suburbs. Frank goes to work for Knox Business machines, the same firm as his father, with the same depressing 9-to-5 future. April finds herself alone in the house with the kids, where did her life go? When they met she was an aspiring actress and he an aspiring, charismatic somebody but seven years and two kids later they are bitter and alienated - she trapped in the home, him in his job, and each screaming at each other about whose life is more suffocating.

In a touching front door scene, April Wheeler, all dolled up for Frank's 30th birthday, beautiful children on both sides, welcomes him with a great proposal. They will ditch it all, sell the house, and move to Paris. April will get a job as a secretary for a school that pays very well, and Frank will be allowed to pursue his dreams. At first he is ecstatic, but over time he is ambivalent, a promotion is offered at work and he begins to have second thoughts that at first he does not share with April. Unspoken in the film is the question, "Does Frank really have any dreams left or did he really have any in the first place? Does he have the capacity or the will to be a film-maker, an artist, a mime, a cyclist, or any of the usual fantasies of "finding yourself" for the corporate robots. His worst fear: what if he ended up selling business machines for a firm in Paris? Replicating his father's life under the banner of opportunity and self-choice.

The key to the story is April, for in the end, while the tragedy is about men and women, it is most hauntingly a story about the stultifying lives of women in suburbia, where the concept of the "housewife" with all the appropriate commodities was enshrined. April, a brilliant, beautiful woman, plans her escape and her dream of freedom with a plan to bankroll, produce, and direct her husband's, which are in fact her own, wildest dreams.

The tragedy of the film is both within its own four walls but also from the false promise of personal happiness locked in the realm of individual fulfillment outside of ethics, society, or any hope of changing the world. At no time do April and Frank think about the world around them; they are each other's world. She does not say, "Let's go down south to help Black people register to vote, let's end the Korean War or go to Paris to free the Algerians and be part of an international movement." In fact, in the context of the film those words would sound ridiculous and contrived. Yet those questions were there for the asking, a real choice of a revolutionary road neither taken or even considered - one that a many brave souls did make at the same time. Remember that Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus at the very moment April and Frank were trapped in their white, suburban dead-end.

And yet, those paths less traveled were the very ones that millions of children of the April's and Frank's of the 1950's did take, the escape from suburbia and from the terrifying tragedy of the nuclear family door to door to door. If revolting against poverty and racism did not come out of their own genetic or socio-economic script, the white kids who went South - who went left - did understand the tragedy of their parents' lives, the desperate struggle for accumulation, the barrenness of the TV and consumer suburbs. They understood what the film does not address even with a wink or a nod: the profound racism of white suburban life, the unbearable whiteness of being.

I first came to life when I was 16 and went to work in the South Bronx and worked with Black and Latino youth. When I went to Harlem a year later I knew I had arrived in the promised land. This was where I wanted to be, where I wanted to sink my roots and fight. A whole generation shared my views and we moved towards the real Revolutionary Road that the Wheeler's missed even though they lived right on it. In the film, director Sam Mendes uses a device from the Richard Yates novel, to interject a character named John Givings to offer a brutal sanity to the situation. An ostensibly mentally ill visitor on leave from a hospital, Givings tells the Wheeler's, especially Frank, "You are afraid to run away from the hopeless emptiness of this suburban life." Fortunately for us, our generation of suburban clones had Martin Luther King, Jr., Fannie Lou Hamer, Malcolm X, Fidel, Che, Mao and Ho to tell us there was a chance to escape, a life of hope and meaning and collectivity on the revolutionary road - and a world to win.


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BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator Eric Mann is a veteran of the Congress of Racial Equality, Students for a Democratic Society, and the United Auto Workers, is the author of: [Comrade George : An Investigation into the Life, Political Thought, and Assassination of George Jackson](#) , [Dispatches From Durban: Firsthand Commentaries on the World Conference Against Racism and Post-September 11 Movement Strategies](#) , and [Katrina's Legacy: White Racism and Black Reconstruction in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast](#) . He is working on his next book, *Revolutionary Organizing in the Age of Reaction, featuring The 25 Qualities of the Successful Organizer*. You can hear Eric Mann is the co-host of *Voices from the Frontlines*, a public affairs hour show every Monday at 4 PM on KPFK, Pacifica, 90.7 FM, and streaming live on the web at www.KPFK.org Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Mann or visit his blog (ericmannblog.blogspot.com).

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