

Letters from the New World
(South Africa) #4

"Kill Bill" Comes to Joburg

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You've seen *Kill Bill* on the bus shelters – the blonde star in a grand prix tracksuit with a samurai sword. It's all over the press, in phrases like "TARANTINO'S TRIUMPH -- PAGES 2, 3, 6 – 7, 10 & 12." The word "brilliant" appears repeatedly, with superlatives, as in absolutely brilliant, amazingly brilliant, astoundingly brilliant.

The impression I got was of a violent movie, brilliantly handled so as to make the violence a light-hearted, merry kind of violence. Additional brilliance apparently lay in the "referencing" by which the film borrows techniques from prior films so filmgoers can have detective fun whispering "Look, Mabel! That's from *Slicing Off Noses*, 1989."

This was intriguing. If we in the print world "borrow", we are called plagiarists and sent to the back doors of restaurants. The notion of cute violence left me a bit at sea. And I felt a pique on behalf of local films, to whom local ink is the difference between life and bankruptcy and who beg for attention. Was this *Kill Bill* *that* much better? I bought a movie ticket.

I lasted half an hour. I might have managed more if they provided sick-bags like on an airplane, but I'm not sure: I also had a pressing urge to shower, with lots of soap.

There were brilliant bits, I suppose. The gentle way a female voice sings the violent opening song is creepily brilliant. And the blood-splattering seemed sort of brilliantly done, the first dozen or so times. It splattered vividly, anyhow.

But I couldn't see a basic, special brilliance, or what is brilliant in a mother being blood-splatteringly killed in front of her 4-year-old, or another

mother being killed (with splatter) on the bed under which her daughter is hiding. Or in the daughter getting a turn to splat after "luckily", I quote, discovering that her mother's murderer is a pederast.

One scene imprinted itself: a male nurse hiring out the body of a comatose female patient, Vaseline thrown in leeringly. It's effective, I grant, wedging like a gallstone in my memory lobe, but "brilliant"? I see sordid. I see sickening. I can't see brilliant.

The world takes all kinds. Some people need brutality; it speeds their adrenalin. Fine, they're welcome; rather have it on the screen than in the street (where if they saw a fraction of Kill Bill they'd be in trauma counselling for ten years.)

But these aren't the only people. I might be a drip, a sissy and chicken, but I'm not unique. If I feel dirty watching this, so do other people, some of whom have been led to see this film as compulsory viewing, advancing mankind's frontiers. Some are revolted but embarrassed to be revolted, and scared to admit they're revolted. I think it's they who laugh at the foulest scenes. Their heads say that what they're watching is disgusting, but society says that what they're watching is brilliant. They feel they must be inferior people, gutless or dull. So they don't disguise, outdoing each other's enthusiasm.

Why does society give them so one-way a message? Could some critics be caught in the same syndrome: "if I don't enthuse over this film I'll be derided as an inferior person, gutless or dull"? Even the few who denounce, denounce with escape hatches: it's racist, because the white chick chops non-white heads off; or it's boring, because its plot plods. Is there a taboo against saying what many viewers surely want to say, that the film is demeaning and psychopathic, and to wish to puke in your shoe is a healthy response?

I think something pathetic is on the go. Once, reviews had to uphold motherhood and apple pie. You couldn't break out. When breaking out first became permissible, it was called freedom. Now the breaking out has become its own new prison. You don't dare be seen to not push limits. People will think you're off the pace.

It's okay that weird tastes are in the world. There always have been. But that the taste for beauty, for honesty, for integrity, for humanity, for the things we inwardly want... that that taste is now a furtive thing and hidden, is wrong.

