

Screenwriter James Schamus Makes His Directorial Debut:

**INDIGNATION**

*An Inter-Review*

*Nobody has anything to worry about from a book.* - Philip Roth, in a conversation about his novel **Indignation**

*"Take care, philosophers and friends, of knowledge, and beware of martyrdom!"* --- Friedrich Nietzsche, **Beyond Good and Evil**

I said to screenwriter and director James Schamus, as we began to discuss his directorial debut, a theatrical film version of Philip Roth's novel **Indignation**: "The movie deserves the disclaimer: "No words by Philip Roth were harmed during the making of this movie."

I was thinking about *Indignation's* inimitable juxtaposition and balance of words, yes, but also of Philip Roth's statement: "The novelist's obsession, moment by moment, is with language: finding the right next word." And when a novel, an integrally woven texture of right next words--sonorously, emotionally, intellectually fused in the heat of the "novelist's obsession," is to be re-told, visualized too, as a theatrical film, what happens to the novel's right words? Found once by the novelist, are they then found again, differently the same, samely-different, by the screenwriter, the director, the actors?

James Schamus, the screenwriter, known for his collaborations with director Ang Lee, thinks about this, too. In a sense, his work, his profession as a screenwriter is, word by word, to think about this exactly, to think about and find "the right next word" as obsessively as the writer does. A distinction made by the wording of the credit in the movie's trailer suggests this as well. The movie, is "based on the novel by Philip Roth," and, not "adapted" but, "written for the screen and directed by James Schamus". For Schamus, writing and directing are, so to speak, two sides of the same right word, sought and found.

For this reason, the novel *Indignation* has become a twice-told tale with twice-found right words. "Indignation" the movie joins, what Schamus, in our conversation, referred to as, "the long lineage of great movies that actually foreground the text."

1950, the Korean War begun, exemplary son and student Marcus Messner, a nineteen year-old (third generation) Jew from Newark, New Jersey, his father a *shokhet* (butcher) and owner of a certified kosher butchery, which the parents run together, Marcus, the first person in his family to go to college, "at the outset of his

mature life,” as he calls the time of which he narrates, ‘exiles’ himself—an inescapable necessity he convinces himself, from his neighborhood, his family, his friends, his teachers, so as to “get as far away from” his father, because his father is driving them both crazy with obsessive worry about the safety and security of Marcus’ person and future, “which any little thing could destroy, the tiniest thing.”

After one year attending Robert Treat College in Newark, NJ, Marcus departs, in indignation, to attend Winesburg College, “a small liberal arts and engineering college in the farm country of north-central Ohio.” This departure, maybe intended as a kind of *lekh lekha*<sup>1</sup>, is not experienced as such. Immediately the question and predicament of his life becomes, to paraphrase from Tehillim<sup>2</sup>, how shall he sing his song in a strange land? He cannot. He shall not.

For all his certainty seeming to the contrary, Marcus knows neither who he really is nor ‘where’ he really is. Being the Jew he was, and would still be, in Newark, does not ‘work’ at Winesburg College. For that young Jewish man, all that awaits him at Winesburg, though it is not referenced, is a kind of prolonged “Trial”, against which his philosophy, his reason, his resistance, the power and persistence of his indignation, render him defenseless and, make him what his oracular father obsessively feared he would be: doomed.

Indignation—the emotion, almost a philosophical position, is, to the book’s story, to Marcus’ story, to the historical time of the story, therefore to the movie’s story, what rage is to the *Illiad* and Achilles, what oracularly manipulated ignorance is to Oedipus Rex and to Oedipus. Oedipus does not have a “complex”, yet still he cannot save himself from Oedipus. Achilles’ rage must be requited and fulfilled:

*Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles,  
murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans countless losses,  
hurling down to the House of Death so many sturdy souls,  
great fighters' souls, but made their bodies carrion,  
feasts for the dogs and birds,  
and the will of Zeus was moving toward its end.  
Begin, Muse, when the two first broke and clashed,  
Agamemnon lord of men and brilliant Achilles.*<sup>3</sup>

‘Indignation—Muse, sing the indignation of Max and Esther Messner’s son Marcus.’ Philip Roth, most probably, does not intend any comparison or

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<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of chapter 12 of Genesis: Abram (not yet Abraham) is told: “Go forth [*lekh lekha*] from your land and your birthplace and your father’s house to the land I will show you.” *Lekh lekha* may also be interpreted as “Go toward yourself”.

<sup>2</sup> Hebrew word for “Praises”, the traditional name for what are also known as The Psalms. The reference is to Psalm 137:4.

<sup>3</sup> Homer, *The Illiad*, translated by Robert Fagles, Penguin 1990, p. 77.

association with his story and its characters and the *Illiad*, with Dean Caudwell as Winesburg College's "lord of men" and Marcus Messner, its "brilliant Achilles"; and yet, for a reader, who discerns in *Indignation* the epic lineaments of Marcus' predicament and tragedy, such associations are there to be extrapolated. For, in this wise too, much of *Indignation*'s story, both novel and film, is about how and "when the two"---Dean Caudwell and Marcus Messner---"first broke and clashed".

James Schamus had to make a choice of indignations, a choice and balance between the novel's total story and what, from that story, his movie needs for it to tell its story as satisfyingly complete and sufficient unto itself. He finds the key to this choice and balance in this: the will of Dean Caudwell, the will of Marcus Messner, at once profoundly antagonistic and strangely in accord, moving toward their end. And, unlike Abraham in the Torah, Winesburg College's "lord of men" will sacrifice his children as and when he deems it necessary.

If we may rightly designate one scene, which is as central to and prominent in the narrative of the film as it is in the book, it is the first meeting, turned interrogation and confrontation between Dean Caudwell and Marcus. This meeting, with its sequels, is an *agon*, wrestling as it does, as its antagonists do, over what, initially for Marcus, are 'the tiniest things', but which are, in actuality, matters of life and death.

Of Marcus, we should not say simplistically that his adolescent pride goes before his fall. Rather, it is his whole as yet (unavoidably) immature, though well-reasoned, ethic of resistance, individuality, non-conformity, 'enlightened' ideal of rational truth, and that entire complex of suffering "for truth's sake" and "defending oneself" that Nietzsche exposes in his *Beyond Good and Evil*. "Character is destiny," (it is said) Heraclitus said. But, mixing in Chekhov, it might be better to say, of Marcus, of Dean Caudwell, of *Indignation*'s other main characters, that character is a loaded gun that must go off. Death is always happy to take the credit for the consequences.

The movie "Indignation" allows the novel *Indignation* to speak its own language, allows the novel's words to continue to do their work of character making and storytelling. "The status of the word in cinema," Schamus observed in our conversation, "is structurally quite low...In a sense, working on "Indignation"---and in a Jewish context, of course, was the opportunity to foreground, not the text *per se*, but the fact that ninety percent of our visuals in our world are made up of people talking to each other."

Philip Roth's words, "written for the screen" by James Schamus, are entrusted to (these are the main characters): Logan Lerman (Marcus Messner), Linda Emond (Esther Messner), Danny Burstein (Max Messner), Tracy Letts (Dean Caudwell), and Sarah Gadon (Olivia Hutton). These are the people, the characters

and the actors who, in ninety percent of the film “Indignation”, are the “people talking to each other”. And they talk to each other with a musical integrity analogous to how the different instruments of a string quartet or an orchestral ensemble talk to each other. The actors’ individual performances, and the ensemble of their performances, in their interpretation and realization of Philip Roth’s words and story, are comparable, say, to a great string quartet performing and interpreting Beethoven’s Late Quartets.

James Schamus directs and visually choreographs his movie with the precision and attention, the visceral immediacy, usually required of a stage play. Director’s vision and the vision of Christopher Blauvelt, the film’s cinematographer, beautifully coincide and adeptly collaborate. As much as, if not more than, objects, sets and locations, it is light and color, their weave as image projected on a screen, which compose the physical environment in which words are spoken, actors act, characters are realized. In this regard, cinematographer Blauvelt’s palette of light and colors functions as does a painter’s, Modigliani, say, or Monet, or Cezanne: that is, to manifest interiority, or, with portraits, to sensually ‘house’ the human figure; or, again, and analogous with Rothko’s palette, to emanate and reverberate interiority.

Intelligence. Lucidity. Style. James Schamus’ movie “Indignation”, the main story in Philip Roth’s novel cinematically translated from within its own words, shares these attributes of the original, as well as the original’s sense of *agon* and its evocation of epic tragedy precipitated by “the tiniest thing”.