

BREAKDOWN [1997]

by

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Jeff (Kurt Russell) and Amy Taylor (Kathleen Quinlan) are driving from Boston to San Diego for a new job and hopefully a new life. They are victimized in the Southwest by a gang that preys on tourists. They kidnap Amy and demand money from Jeff. However, he sets out to rescue his wife, fearing she will be killed with or without the ransom. After a series of harrowing adventures, he rescues Amy, and fights and kills the four kidnapers. (Rated R)

It is always interesting to trace the roots of a phenomenon. *Breakdown* is a cheap, simplistic, easy film which has nevertheless captured the public's imagination. Literally millions have seen it in its first week of release, yet it will be quickly forgotten. Hollywood often tries to make films like this; in fact, a film that can be described in a single sentence is given the honorific of "high concept" – and with a straight face. I find it almost impossible to believe that anything worthwhile can be described in a single sentence (with the possible exception of a Haiku poem).

However, the filmmakers often pack a simple-minded plot line with enough social, psychological and archetypal embellishments to draw the public in. While this says little for the films themselves, it is a testament to the power of archetypal psychology. *Breakdown* – greedy country hicks prey on unsuspecting middle class tourists – is worth a brief archeological excursion if for no further reason than to understand what the American public is currently sensitive to. On inspection, the film reveals several interesting tender spots in the American psyche.

Of course, films today are based on other films and *Breakdown* is no exception. The use of large 18-wheel trucks goes back to Steven Spielberg's early TV film, *Duel*, in which an innocent man is first hounded and then threatened by an anonymous truck driver. The evil inherent in rural locations, especially ones we assume beautiful (this is John Ford country but with an almost opposite set of values) or at worst benign, recalls films like *Deliverance* at the top end of the scale and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* [1974] at the bottom. America seems to have expanded its locus of paranoia over the past few decades – nowhere is safe. According to these films, urban and inner-city locations are the centers of drug dealing and gang warfare, rural and farming areas are full of serial killers and animal mutilators, and even suburbia is coming into question (witness the recent and popular first-time-on-video release of *The Stepford Wives* [1975]).

Travel is another source of danger. Leaving an established life for a new and hopefully better one used to be called the hero's journey and, according to Joseph Campbell's optimistic view, ended with individuation. Now it is an impossible journey, fraught with danger and death. Here the striking antecedent to *Breakdown* is the brutal and very disturbing *The Hitchhiker* [1986].

When confronted with the working class or the poor, being intelligent or middle-class has also become dangerous. While this is the simplistic sociology of *Breakdown*, it was done with much greater effect by Sam Peckinpah in *Straw Dogs* [1971] (which featured Dustin Hoffman as a mild-mannered American math professor and his Irish wife visiting her hometown. She is raped, he beaten and, after giving up his intellectual pacifist ways, kills them all in bloody revenge.) In *Breakdown*, Jeff and Amy are picked randomly, perhaps because of their shiny new yuppie car.

The bottom line of *Breakdown* is: fear everyone and everywhere. The rampant paranoia of *Breakdown* should come as no surprise – take a look at the six-o'clock news. It consists of primarily little tragic stories blown out of proportion (always made more important than political or economic news) and given a veneer of paranoia – the innocent victim did not deserve what happened and that same can happen to the viewer at any moment. We know that fear sells products. In this way, the TV newscast fits in well with the other programming – its purpose is to deliver an audience in the correct psychological (i.e., vulnerable) frame of mind to the advertisers. *Breakdown* simply continues this effort to spread paranoia and distrust. Perhaps the “breakdown” of the title doesn't refer to what happens to their car, but what the film sees as happening to society in general.

The missing loved one is another common theme in film. Rescue of a wife or a child is not a very altruistic motivation for action – it is basal, just above survival. It doesn't take much thought; it offers the searcher little choice. Here *Breakdown* echoes *The Vanishing* [1988] (however, the latter offers no resolution, no answer – see the Dutch version, the American remake is worthless). But the idea of rescue has a history much greater than film – as does the common-man detective investigating a crime.

Investigations, too, have a very long history. One of the oldest murder investigations – questioning the suspects, tricking one into confessing, and so on – is described in Genesis(?) as Jehovah investigates the murder of Able. Another classic ancient detective is Oedipus – in perhaps the great-grand-daddy of all *film noir*, he finds that he himself is the criminal. But perhaps the greatest mythological searcher for a loved one is the story of Demeter and Persephone.

The parallels between *Breakdown* and Demeter's search are striking (and so is the dumbing down). Jeff realizes that he needs Amy in the same way that the earth needs its springtime. Jeff finds Amy in the physically lowest point in the film, in a basement under a barn just as Demeter finds Persephone in the bowels of the earth in Hades' realm. Demeter first gets word of Persephone's location from the messenger god, Mercury, in the exact parallel Jeff gets information about Amy from the evil delivery boy sent to pick up the ransom money. (Actually, the myth of Demeter and Persephone was worked out

much more cleverly, and far less visibly in the science fiction action film *RoboCop* [1987].)

The differences between *Breakdown* and the story of Persephone's rescue are as striking as the parallels. In one, a husband searches for his wife and in the other a mother searches for her daughter. *Breakdown* is strictly a man's story. Jeff is almost never off the screen, yet Amy plays her part – unfortunately off-screen and unrecognized. She lies about their wealth to save both of their lives; she fights the men as well as she can. However, once Jeff is around, she suddenly turns helpless, can do little but scream and get her pants caught in the car so she cannot get out. While the story of Demeter and Persephone often emphasizes the similarities between the women and their roles, often outlining responsibilities to themselves, to each other, and to the rest of society, unfortunately in *Breakdown* Jeff's motivations are never expressed beyond husbandly duty, and Amy's brave and important role is never considered.

With all its faults and borrowings, *Breakdown* is nevertheless a well-crafted film that, with healthy doses of sociology, psychology, and mythology, has become a very popular film. It is a testament to the power of archetypal psychology and sociology over the stupidity and simple-mindedness. It is also a reflection of the paranoia rampant in our land. Most disturbing about the film is its ending: the hero kills the disabled villain. It has been a Hollywood tradition that a hero only kills in self-defense. When our national paranoia rises to such heights that moral boundaries such as this can be broken with great audience approval, we have much to fear on our cultural horizon.

Breakdown. Directed by Jonathan Mostow. Written by Mostow and Sam Montgomery. Distributed by Columbia Pictures, 1997.