

THE ICE STORM [1997]

by

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The Ice Storm. Directed by Ang Lee. Screenplay by James Schamus. Based on the novel by Rick Moody. Distributed by Searchlight Pictures, 1997.

We follow two dysfunctional Connecticut families, the Hoods and the Carvers, over the span of the 1973 Thanksgiving weekend. Externally, America is being torn apart by the Watergate revelations. Internally, the families are torn apart by frigidity, shoplifting, alcoholism, nymphomania, drug use, extra-marital affairs, and just plain blindness to what is going on around them. Elena Hood (Karen Allen) refuses to have sex with her husband Ben (Kevin Kline), so he is carrying on an affair with Jane Carver (Sigourney Weaver) who is, in turn, neglected by her busy husband, Jim (Jamey Sheridan). Meanwhile, teenage Wendy Hood (Christina Ricci) plays sexual games with both Mikey Carver (Elijah Wood) and his younger brother Sandy (Adam Hann-Byrd). Ben's oldest son, Paul (Tobey Maguire) is off to New York City on a doomed sexual attempt of his own. In the midst of a wife-swapping party, an ice storm arrives, and the various relationships fall into total ruin. Meanwhile, Mikey goes out into the storm and dies when a fallen power line electrocutes him. (Rated R).

When director Ang Lee came to America in 1978, he changed his name. And the sociological implications of his name change may explain, at least partially, his new film, *The Ice Storm*. In Taiwan, his name was Lee Ang following the Oriental tradition of putting the family name first. This makes sense given a culture that values the family above all, both in the present and in the past in the form of ancestors. Even today, after decades of American influence, there is, for instance, no social security in Taiwan because none is needed: families take care of all their members and the planning starts from the day one is born. This family-as-the-center-of-the-universe ethic is reflected in Lee's Taiwanese films like *The Wedding Banquet*, *Eat Drink Man Woman*, and *Pushing Hands*.

In America, of course, we do things differently. Here the individual person comes first and the family second (or later). And this is reflected in the way we name ourselves. In America, Lee Ang is known as Ang Lee. Person first, family second. This reflects both America's belief in the superiority and independence of the individual above the group and America's unending encouragement of individual egoism. While this attitude has led to "Yankee ingenuity" and global economic and political success, it also has its dark side, both on the public and personal front.

The films done by Lee Ang and the films done by Ang Lee are quite different and, perhaps coincidentally, seem to reflect the social implications of his name change. In his Taiwanese films he both loves and is amused by the complexity of the family structures, responsibility and “face.” In *The Ice Storm* admiration and love have turned into pity. Unfortunately, we the audience are not drawn in as we are with his loving families – we are left out in the cold. The result is an admirable if compassionless film. The population of this film is repugnant – we really have no one to identify with. Thus, we are left with a series of symbols which Lee manipulates in an attempt to make us emote. Unfortunately, these become a rather weak substitute for the true emotions we would get if we could get inside the characters. However, while the film leaves us outside these peoples’ lives, the symbols themselves seem to take on a life of their own.

The film’s opening image is a train stuck on icy tracks. Pretty obvious: inability to move, no progress toward a goal, growth frozen. Within the train, we see a young man reading a *Fantastic Four* comic book. Apparently not trusting his audience, the director feels compelled to provide a narrator to explain it all to us: “The Fantastic Four are like a family. The more power they have, the more damage they could do to each other without even knowing it. Your family is like your own personal anti-matter, the place you emerge from and the place you return to when you die.” In this particular *Fantastic Four* episode, one of the superheroes’ son turns into an atomic bomb and must be destroyed. Well, this doesn’t leave much for an audience to do.

This heavy-handedness continues. Moments later in a high school, we hear a discussion of Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* (directed more to us than the students) and his ideas of right and wrong: doing good is too easy and therefore doing bad is better for the soul, especially from an existential point of view. The film seems to be introduced by a series of small, transparent lectures on the film’s point of view and the stance we should take. (Even the dates are burdened with significance: November 22 and 23, 1973, are the 10th anniversary of the Kennedy assassination and are in the middle of the Watergate hearings – two major breakdowns of the collective American psyche.) Fortunately, this ham-fisted lecturing soon abates, and we are treated to the two families themselves.

The exploration is two-tiered: the children and their parents. The film quickly assigns the children’s problems to their dysfunctional parents. While their parents are off at work, trysting with each other, drunk, or at spouse-swapping parties, the children are left alone to explore themselves and each other. It is not that the parents don’t love their children, they do. They seem so wrapped up in themselves that they are unable to communicate (much like the film itself – they are obvious and obscure at the same time). While the kids imitate the sexuality of their parents, at least their activities are portrayed with a little dose of innocence. Like most children, they misinterpret what they see and thus their imitations – sex, pot, and booze – often lead to disaster. Only the children have voices: the disillusionment and turmoil repressed by the parents is expressed by the children, especially in Wendy, a 14-year-old who will come on sexually to any willing boy.

The adults are dysfunctional suburbanites mired in the '70's while burdened with left-over ideologies from the 1960's, which, for most of them, have come too late. The social revolution of the '60's trickled up to these yuppies. They desire to be "with it" without paying the price of experience. They externalize – martinis augmented with marijuana – what should be internal. Thus, they uniformly exhibit a great psychic void within. Going through the motions of what once gave them a sense of escape and freedom, they now feel curiously trapped in a burned-out repetition that has lost its soul. Ironically, while the children imitate their parents' sexuality, the parents are exploring their own, trying to recapture an innocent, child-like approach that they seem to have lost. They are even bored by their sins. They grope aimlessly (like the film itself).

The film makes the adventures of the two generations blatantly parallel. While Mikey is in New York attempting to lose his virginity by drugging a girl – who passes out on him, literally – their parents are trying to swap wives and husband before they pass out.

While at this point, the ham-fisted lecturing has been abandoned, there are still many "in your face" symbolic exegeses on the characters. For instance, when Ben leaves Jane's house after some rather cold sex, he trips because he's not looking where he's going – get it? He and his affair are headed for disaster – and this is telegraphed broad and clear as if we really needed that information after what we have just seen.

Another example. Wendy bikes downtown and shoplifts some junk food. Elena, in a desperate attempt to regain the freedom of her youth, takes up bike riding after she sees her daughter ride by on a bicycle. So far, so good: bike = freedom = youth. However, she immediately bikes downtown to shoplift some cosmetics from the local drug store (in the same store visited by her daughter only hours before – and gets caught). So, here's the message: youth = breaking rules; adult = not being able to get away with it. What does the film maker think the audience brings to his films, the same empty headedness he portrays in his characters?

Of course, the central metaphor of the film is the ice storm – duh! Its ramifications are almost continuously worked out in the most obvious ways. Communication is frozen: the more convoluted the interpersonal relations become, the more quiet the parties become. But the ice isn't only outside. And to let us know, we see lots of ice cubes and hands dipped in ice. In many films that use the weather as a metaphor like *When Harry Met Sally* [1989], the couple meets in the springtime, gets together in the summer, begins to drift apart in the fall, is at their emotional bottom in winter, and finally resolves their problems and gets happily back together again in spring. With this scheme, the weather reflects the emotional mood of the couple. In *The Ice Storm*, Lee separates what he sees as the chaff from the wheat and simply begins in a winter that, over the three days of the film's narrative, gets worse and worse. Here ice coats hearts with a vastness of melancholy as much as it does the roads and trees.

A minor glimmer of hope at the end: We see a new day dawn, some of the icicles are dripping water and beginning to melt. We see Ben fess up to his emotional vacuum

and break down in tears. Will the relation between Ben and his wife be resolved? We never know, for the film seems to be saying that recognizing your own psychic void is enough – healing is not an issue or impossible to achieve.

Now, there are some things very wrong with *The Ice Storm* and some things very right with it. Ang Lee has fallen into the trap of attempting to make an intellectual, subtle film which doesn't trust its audience either to be intelligent or to discover the subtleties for themselves. This accounts for the over-simplistic use of obvious symbols and the lecture-like introduction. The central metaphor of ice, which may have worked in the book, on screen becomes obvious and repetitive. The film treats its characters with a smugness that turns them into little more than stereotyped buffoons, never really allowing them to become human beings we care about. In sum, *The Ice Storm* never satisfies the promise it makes, to become an insightful psychological drama.

On the other hand, what might save *The Ice Storm* from falling into an all too familiar class of films – the moving but dreary drama – might be that it reflects what is happening in America today: America itself seems as fouled up as these two families, which live in glass houses but don't have the guts to throw any stones. If we are willing to make the leap into the present, which the film itself doesn't encourage, we find a film that is sad, disturbing and intelligent, a film also about sin, punishment and redemption. The parents of *The Ice Storm* try to be pals with their kids and “find themselves” while today's parents are trying to find their kids. The kids are left without a moral compass to fumble their way through life; ditto today. Again, if we are willing to make the leap, *The Ice Storm* connects two eras in America's history when authority crumbles, when both public and private stability is threatened and when morality seems to have disappeared from the surface of the earth.

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