Opinion
Culture
Bradley Cooper (Stanton Carlisle), Cate Blanchett (Lilith Ritter) and Rooney Mara (Molly) star i

Bradley Cooper (Stanton Carlisle), Cate Blanchett (Lilith Ritter) and Rooney Mara (Molly) star in a scene from the movie "Nightmare Alley." The Oscar-nominated movie is in theaters and streaming on Hulu and HBOMax. (CNS/20th Century Studios/Kerry Hayes)



by Rebecca Bratten Weiss

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Director Guillermo del Toro's Oscar-nominated "Nightmare Alley," based on the 1946 novel by William Lindsay Gresham, follows the classical tragic plotline: a rise to power that leads inevitably to a fall. The protagonist, Stanton Carlisle, joins a seedy traveling carnival where he becomes fascinated with the art of mentalism and discovers his own uncanny gifts of reading people and deceiving them. Later, he will use these gifts to con the wealthy and powerful, until, seduced by his own power, he goes too far and destroys himself.

NCR goes to the movies

On March 25, NCR Opinion & Culture Editor Olga Segura moderated a conversation about the 2022 Oscars with Jose Solís and Sr. Rose Pacatte. This year's awards ceremony, honoring movies released in 2021, is Sunday, March 27. Here are the

nominated movies NCR has reviewed.

"Being the Ricardos"

"The Hand of God"

"CODA"

"The Eyes of Tammy Faye"

"Attica"

"Don't Look Up"

"Dune"

"Encanto"

"No Time To Die"

"Nightmare Alley"

The film opens in a bleak room in a derelict midwestern farmhouse. Stan, played by Bradley Cooper, is dragging a body across the wooden floor. He drops the body into a hole in the floor, lights a match and the room goes up in flames. Stan then walks away across desolate fields with the burning house behind him. For this and other scenes Del Toro drew on the aesthetics of American realist painters such as Andrew Wyeth, Edward Hopper and Thomas Hart Benton. But the film's genre is explicitly noir, which Del Toro has described as "the flip side of the American dream."

No matter where Stanton travels, the viewer can never forget that he is walking away from something ugly, violent and desperate. There is no aspect of life where ugliness, violence and desperation can't be found. The clearest example is in the figure of the carnival "geek," a caged and filthy drug addict, covered with cuts and scars, who entertains the crowds by biting the heads off live chickens to earn his fix. Stan's first encounter with the carnival comes when he wanders into the geek show, and his first words are spoken to the geek: "I'm not going to hurt you." But when the

geek, who has escaped from his cage, attacks Stan, Stan turns and beats the geek nearly to death.

In his depiction of the carnival geek, Gresham drew on the actual sordid customs of early 20th century carnivals. "Nightmare Alley," for all the extravagance of its visuals and its themes, is a story about the real world. "I wanted to do a movie that was set in the past, but spoke about today," Del Toro said of his project.

The carnival's owner, played by Willem Dafoe, introduces the geek show with the question, "is he a man or is he a beast?" This invokes the memorable passage from Renaissance philosopher Pico della Mirandola's "Oration on the Dignity of Man," in which the Creator addresses the newly created human: "We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer."

In the figure of the geek, the line between human and monster is blurred. The most decent and likable characters who travel with the carnival do so knowing the geek travels with them, caged and tormented. Even the pretty, innocent Molly, played by Rooney Mara, who runs away with Stan and eventually becomes his wife, lives with the knowledge that the geek is there. The carnival's success is predicated upon his misery.

"Nightmare Alley" hinges on the classical tragic mechanism where the hero is damned not by some impersonal power but by their own choices and actions. If the plot were set in a naturalist universe where choice doesn't matter, it would be depressing — and unrealistic. But because it is realistic, it is not depressing so much as it is terrifying.

Later, when Stan has left the colorful sleaziness of carnival life behind him and risen into the world of Chicago's elite, he is still navigating a world full of monsters wearing human faces.

The Ferris wheel that spins slowly, inexorably, above the carnival, against a sinister sky, evokes the classical and Medieval idea of the rota fortunae, or "fortune's wheel," dictating the fates of humans. The image implies a world in which human freedom is limited and fate dictates our ends, and one could be tempted to read in "Nightmare Alley" a message of this futility and inevitability.

Stan's con, once he establishes himself as a sophisticated mentalist, is called a "spook show": convincing people that he's made contact with the souls of their dead loved ones. Back in his carnival days, his mentor, Pete, had warned Stan not to go down this road. In response to Stan's argument that he was giving people hope, Pete stated that "it ain't hope if it's a lie." But it turns out, people are desperate to be lied to in this way.

Stan forms an alliance with the femme fatale character, Dr. Lilith Ritter, played by Cate Blanchett, who feeds him the dark secrets of the wealthy and powerful, but also warns him not to go too far. Stan is growing increasingly drunk on his own power, however.

"You don't fool people, Stan. They fool themselves," Dr. Ritter warns him. This is one of the great truths about human nature "Nightmare Alley" elucidates. The other is an observation Pete makes: Even while people will hungrily devour falsehood, nevertheless, they are "desperate to tell you who they are." This need to be understood and seen is part of the reason Stan's con works so well. It is also part of the reason that his con, ultimately, fails.

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In an interview with NPR, Del Toro talked about how his directorial interpretation of "Nightmare Alley" was inspired by the spiritualists who had tried to con his family after his father was kidnapped, and the grift of religious leaders who trick people into giving away their whole fortunes. "[W]e try to find comfort in belief systems that we know are not entirely true, but we deposit all the remnants of our faith and wide-eyed innocence into them, only to be disappointed," Del Toro told NPR.

"Nightmare Alley" is an important movie for our times, when we are witnessing people embrace conspiracy theories and political con artists.

While Del Toro made certain changes to the plot when adapting "Nightmare Alley," the life of the novelist Gresham remains important for understanding the story. Gresham was driven both by a desire to understand the truth and a terror that the truth would be unbearable. He was married to Joy Davidman, who later married C.S. Lewis after she and Gresham divorced. Gresham admired Lewis' work and explored some of the same questions the Christian author explored. His arrival at different

answers seems almost an accident of fate.

Christian audiences may grapple with the question of what differentiates faith in an invisible God from a propensity to buy the false hope offered by Gresham's con man. When is a leap of faith the thing that keeps us on the side of truth and justice? And when are we just desperate to be lied to?

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