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Bandits

Abstract

This is a review of *Bandits* (2001).

I really didn't expect to be writing a review of this film, having gone to it in one of those escapist modes, but some of the ideas kept nagging me and here I am writing. *Bandits* is one of those fun, enjoyable films that yet makes you think. Its mixture of lightheartedness with religious significance reminds me of films like *Groundhog Day*, *Run Lola Run*, or *City Slickers*.

The story is simple: two cons, Joe (Bruce Willis) and Terry (Billy Bob Thornton), break out of prison and rob a bunch of banks. "Joe" is the typical Bruce Willis character, hard-nosed and physically tough, but we also see him reading Sun-Tzu's *Art of War* and quoting from the Tao Te Ching. He is hot tempered at the beginning, and his spontaneity seems to have led him into troubles. By practicing "anger management," as Terry keeps encouraging him, he is able to keep the temper down, meanwhile maintaining his spontaneous actions and putting them to positive use. Terry is his opposing force, the psychosomatically-challenged smart guy who comes up with plans when necessary. He is the yang to Joe's yin. There is constant tension between them, but they just keep moving along, working together seamlessly and achieving their goals.

Terry and Joe learn not to "attack" banks, storming in with guns blazing, but to go with the flow, making things up as they go. This doesn't seem like a good idea at first, especially to Terry, but Joe persists in a classic Taoist attitude of non-action (wu wei). Their first heist is undertaken with nothing but a magic marker,

and while guns enter into the picture, this is a film in which no one ever gets shot and no one gets killed. Well, almost, but I won't tell all. Terry and Joe become known as the "sleepover bandits" because they "kidnap" bank managers the night before the heist, keeping them hostage in their own house and then heading to the bank in the morning before anyone else arrives for work. These "sleepovers" become a particular point of hilarity as Terry and Joe join in family conversations with the hostaged family, even helping the kids cut their food. Rather than going directly against the bank people, they work alongside them. As a result, they become legends in short time, and by the end of the film bank managers gladly welcome them into their homes. In true Taoist fashion, the bad guys are hardly distinguishable from the good guys.

The tension between the two, however, is challenged by the presence of Kate (Cate Blanchett), a bored, rich housewife looking for a new adventure. As the viewer expects, she ends up romantically involved with both Terry and Joe at different times, and this threatens to separate them. This has some nice twists to it though, and rather than it being the boys fighting over the one girl, she steps in and challenges their possessive behavior. She tells them, "between the two of you, you are the perfect man," but she refuses to choose between the two, instead opting to allow the dynamism of their yin and yang energies to maintain full force. Kate makes Joe and Terry acknowledge their necessary bonds to each other, and in some

ways they together become a "masculine" energy that must be complemented by her "feminine" energy.

Shot at some of the most beautiful spots along the west coast, the scenery helps create a lush, flowing, mystical feel to the film, lending visual-formal credence to its borrowings from Taoism. Images of the ocean, sunsets, and other rhythms of the natural world coalesce to allow the viewer into the energies of life. *Bandits* is an action film, yet I've never been so relaxed watching a bank robbery.

Director Barry Levinson (*Diner*, *Good Morning Vietnam*, and *Rain Man*) and former *Twin Peaks* writer Harley Peyton put together a funny, intelligent show. No classic film this one, but certainly a fun, and perhaps useful one for illustrations of Taoism in the classroom.