

IT'S ALL IN YOUR HEAD:
AS GOOD AS IT GETS, THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT, AND
OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE DISORDER IN CONTEMPORARY CINEMA

Anyone with OCD will tell you, it is never more infuriating or insulting than when someone says, “Oh, I’m a little OCD.” Reducing OCD to a mere peculiarity is like saying one suffers from a little dwarfism or one has a little cancer.

As a teenager, I would experience a crippling fear of running someone over as I was driving down a road. Of course, in my mind I knew I had done no such thing. Nevertheless, I had to retrace my steps and drive the same route over and over again to ensure myself that I was not leaving behind a dead body in the road. This ritual sounds baseless, almost comedic when said out loud. However, in the moment, it was very, very real. Furthering my panic were mild hallucinations that there was, indeed, someone lying dead in the road behind me even as I tried to convince myself that I didn’t feel any sort of impact. For years after I had gotten this particular obsession under control, whenever I would drive a car, I would always leave a small object – keys, sunglasses, a book – on the passenger seat with the comprehension that if the car was to run over someone in the road, the impact would cause the object to fly off of the seat. This visual indicator was meant to provide me with confirmation that everything was OK since I couldn’t necessarily rely upon my own recollection.

I didn’t know much about Lars von Trier’s *The House That Jack Built* (2018) before I sat down to stream it other than that a) it generated mass audience walkouts at the 2018 Cannes Film

Festival; b) it concerned a serial killer; and c) it starred Matt Dillon. Once the film started, I was immediately drawn in by its gritty aesthetic. *The House That Jack Built* is a harrowing and ultraviolent horror-drama concerning a serial killer named Jack who relates his story via quasi-confessional to an otherworldly therapist-guide called Verge, as Verge escorts Jack to the entrance of Hell.

Representing a complete 180-degree swing in the opposite direction on the cinematic spectrum from *The House That Jack Built*, *As Good As It Gets* (James L. Brooks, 1997) is a heart-warming comedy-drama that centers on successful author and lovable curmudgeon Melvin Udall and his redemptive relationships with single-mom waitress, Carol, and damaged artist and neighbor, Simon.

What really struck me about *The House That Jack Built* occurred not long into watching the movie, when it is revealed that protagonist Jack suffers from obsessive-compulsive disorder (“OCD”).

How would a craftsman like von Trier integrate and interpret Jack’s condition, a condition which held such personal relevance, within his narrative? I was cautiously optimistic but nevertheless apprehensive that von Trier and Dillon, whether consciously or not, might possibly compromise the seriousness of OCD and paint it as nothing other than a “cute quirk.”

Which is exactly how I observed the portrayal of obsessive-compulsive disorder in the Oscar-winning *As Good As It Gets*. Using these two notable films as case studies, I began to

think about how obsessive-compulsive disorder is represented in the modern cinema. How might OCD be represented in each film and why? Does the portrayal of OCD in each film contribute to or obfuscate the common trope present in movies portraying any sort of disability: that of triumph over adversity?

Background: I can appreciate the utter audacity that Lars von Trier applies in nurturing his visions. The hyperviolent and, at times, hypersexualized content on display in his films coupled with his often bleak and outré scenarios are a lot for the average filmgoer to withstand.

His works address such concepts as religion, depression, socialism, among other dense themes (Sobolla). However, it's all in the service of sparking people to thought, of provoking a reaction, whatever form such reaction may take. In von Trier's own words, "I'm from a period when provocation was seen as a fundamentally appealing thing in Denmark because it gets people thinking... You start seeing things in a new way. Maybe you'll get angry, maybe you'll feel great. But some process gets going" (Sobolla).

As Good As It Gets comes to the screen courtesy of Brooks, the man responsible for such commercially successful comedy-dramas as *Terms of Endearment*, *Broadcast News*, and *Spanglish*. Von Trier and Brooks each approach their work from different artistic traditions and motivations: von Trier from a place of provocation; Brooks from a more universally accessible approach. In discussing his 2010 film, *How Do You Know*, Brooks acknowledged: "The truth is people are so afraid to make sentimental films, but the point of this film is true. It's the fact that really bad things can happen to you and the right person can walk through the door and make

things better. The problem remains large, but your spirit rises and the problem shifts in position a little. It doesn't quite occupy center stage and I think that's true and romantic" (Abel).

The House That Jack Built was independently produced and distributed while *As Good As It Gets* was a Hollywood production all the way. Accounting for the obvious commercial interests behind each film, it can be presumed that each film came with inherent restrictions on what it could and could not portray. The producers who backed von Trier's film would have undoubtedly been aware that they were collaborating with such a polarizing filmmaker. Similarly, viewers who bought a ticket for *The House That Jack Built* were, I would imagine, interested in seeing the film because they knew it was a Lars von Trier movie and were keen to expect a no-holds-barred endurance test about a serial killer. It is not unreasonable, then, to assume that von Trier enjoyed a lot more freedom by virtue of his independent production in which to highlight the harrowing mental state that can accompany an OCD mania. By contrast, if the filmmakers behind *As Good As It Gets* went too far in depicting the mental anguish that, in a more hard-hitting film, Melvin likely would endure, the movie might have run the risk of alienating moviegoers who had come to see a heartwarming, PG-13-rated movie. The two films' respective depictions of OCD and the stress it inflicts upon those who suffer from it might then be perceived as a result of each film's genre relative to each film's fiscal circumstances.

Genre. Within the realm of the cinema, it could be argued that mental illness is ordinarily shown as either tragically frightening, such as in *Frances* and *Girl, Interrupted* or endearing, like in *Garden State* or *Benny & Joon*. Once in a while, a picture will come along that will attempt a tonal fusion between the horrifying and the uplifting, like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

Artistic genres are, of course, amenable to overlap and hybridization: you've heard of the romantic comedy, the musical fantasy, the sci-fi thriller, etc. As Steven Neale states in his work "Genre in Hollywood," "...many Hollywood films—and many Hollywood genres—are hybrid and multi-generic. This is as true of the feature film as it is of an obvious hybrid like musical comedy" (Neale 51).

In *The House That Jack Built*, there are multiple instances that are consistent with signifiers of the horror film: shocking violence, gore, depravity, among others. Jack incontrovertibly suffers from OCD: he explicitly indicates as much when he holds up a sign with the letters O-C-D. He is plagued by obsessions (possibly rooted in the fear that his true nature as a psychopath will be exposed) which prompt compulsions, rituals that Jack must engage in in order to assuage the obsessive thoughts.

As Good As It Gets is unquestionably a comedy-drama, as evidenced by several generic signifiers within, such as peppy music and a bright, colorful palette. Melvin's mental illness is an extension of his miserly character and allows him to be perceived as more of a loveable curmudgeon. The physical look of the film is sunshiny and polished and the screenplay is peppered with social comedy indicants of a spirited story, in contrast to the stark, bleak palette and handheld shakiness used to evoke an air of unease in *The House That Jack Built*. Hans Zimmer's lovely score for *As Good As It Gets* is buoyant and sprightly, and as such, can be credited, at least partly, for contributing to the film's perception of OCD as something adorably quirky. There is an instance in the film when Melvin is packing for a road trip to Baltimore and his clothes are neatly laid out and compartmentalized even before being loaded into his suitcase.

The accompanying soundtrack to this scene is of the breezy and relaxed sort one might observe, for example, in an early Woody Allen movie.

Thus, the common thread linking *The House That Jack Built* and *As Good As It Gets* is the dramatic component. With the dramatic element in place as a foundational narrative framework, to depict Jack's disorder as anything but grossly upsetting would be contrary to the generic horror categorization of the film. If von Trier had chosen to stage Jack's OCD for drollery or sympathy rather than abject revulsion, *The House That Jack Built* would have been more accurately described as a comedy-drama, more along the lines of the Brooks film.

Presentation. A major consequence of OCD is that it hinders an individual's ability to function normally on a personal, social, and routine level (Geller). In Jack's case, the more time he spends checking and re-checking that a character's house is properly devoid of any indication of his presence, the more Jack reduces his chances that he will flee the crime scene unnoticed. In fact, Jack spends so much time at a particular character's home after murdering her that he ends up enduring a woefully stressful confrontation with a police officer. Jack is experiencing a palpable fear and overpowering anxiety inducing his mind to resolutely conclude that if certain rituals are not performed, certain tasks undertaken, disaster will strike, i.e., he will get caught.

Melvin's disorder, on the other hand, doesn't seem to elicit the same level of anxiety-based terror that it does in Jack. There is hardly an indication in *As Good As It Gets* that the consequences for Melvin's behavior are anything other than an unwelcome disruption to his routine. Someone suffering from OCD or in the throes of an OCD episode is experiencing

something truly terrifying, at least to them. They are not, as so many mistakenly characterize OCD sufferers, simply being anal retentive.

I would posit that several of Melvin's disorderly traits are not so much a result of an anxiety-centric obsessive-compulsive disorder, but perhaps may be more exhibitiv of obsessive-compulsive personality disorder ("OCPD"). Though related and sometimes easy to confuse, OCD and OCPD are entirely separate disorders as confirmed by their separate designations in the DSM-5, though they can co-exist in an individual (Mayo).

Melvin is reliant upon a certain order and precision in conducting his daily life: he has breakfast at the same restaurant and is served by the same waitress every morning; his medicine cabinet houses bars of soap all perfectly stacked on top of one another; and Melvin's clothes are laid out upon his bed with mathematical severity prior to being packed into a suitcase. One gets the impression that if a bar of soap or piece of clothing were out of place, Melvin would become apoplectic. As Melvin scurries down the sidewalk to his favorite restaurant each day, he is careful not to inadvertently brush up against another person, a practical impossibility in New York City. The critical difference between Jack's mental state and Melvin's, however, is Jack's preoccupation with cleanliness manifesting as a rabid, maniacal obsession with leaving no trace at his crime scenes such that he must return to them again and again in order to quell the terrifying anxiety.

I, for one, know this terror well. The perceived consequences of my anxiety were founded in a terror not unlike Jack's: I might kill someone, be arrested, and spend the rest of my life in

prison. What differentiated my affliction from a personality issue into an anxiety issue was not only the inconvenience of potentially being late to wherever I was going (disruption of daily activities), but the overwhelming compulsion to engage in rituals to satisfy my debilitating and literal fear of death.

In my observation, *As Good As It Gets* allows only a singular instance in which to represent a similar anguish. The scene occurs directly after Melvin closes his apartment door following a brief chat with Frank, Simon's boyfriend. After closing the door, Melvin proceeds with his usual ritual of turning the lock on his door five times before stepping away (the audience isn't clued into why Melvin performs this particular ritual).

This time, however, Melvin doesn't step away after the first attempt. Something goes wrong, and he tries again. The soundtrack in this instance is not peppy but projects a dramatic one-tone chord. Melvin steps back from the door, quietly telling himself that it's OK. He puts his face in his hands (a behavior Jack also performs in frustration) takes a deep breath to mentally work through the nervousness, and he begins to sob.

This moment of profound truth is heartbreaking because the physical pain that Melvin is experiencing and the emotional toll that his behavior is taking on him in that moment is read on his face and in his behavior. The cutaways to the little dog watching Melvin from across the room, while cute, provide an interesting avatar for anyone who has ever witnessed someone in the heat of an obsessive-compulsive cycle: equal parts confusion and sympathy.

My interest in both *The House That Jack Built* and *As Good As It Gets* is not the simple fact that they depict OCD (or OCPD), but rather in the *intent* surrounding each film's presentation of the disorder. In his insightful essay "Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People," disability studies theorist Paul K. Longmore theorizes about a disabled character's portrayal as "monster," specifically in horror films, when he states, "The subtext of many horror films is fear and loathing of people with disabilities" (4). Longmore's statement provides a measure of deeper meaning to the character of Jack since, on the surface, he is a fearful character, a psychopathic serial killer. But Jack's affliction with OCD allows us to assign a level of karmic projection onto him for committing such loathsome actions. Longmore states that among the "three common prejudices against handicapped people" is that a "disability is a punishment for evil" (4). Jack's death at the conclusion of *The House That Jack Built* (or at the beginning, depending upon how you read von Trier's narrative), exonerates the viewer from having witnessed Jack's evil in action. Per Longmore, "...as with the "monster" and criminal characterizations, these dramas present death as the only logical and humane solution" (6). With Jack's death, society's stasis can be restored, and the viewer no longer has anything to fear (7).

We don't see this "punishment" in *As Good As It Gets* because while Melvin is presented as a horrible character in the first reel of the film, the character experiences an arc that softens him materially by the film's conclusion. Melvin's obsessions aren't a punishment because he is not, ultimately, portrayed as a villainous character. Therefore, we are unable to assign the same level of karmic projection to Melvin. While Jack falls in line with Longmore's assertion of subtext in horror films as a fear and loathing of people with disabilities, Longmore's assertion cannot be applied to *As Good As It Gets* not because it's not a horror movie, but because Melvin

is redeemed for us; he doesn't remain "a monster" (4). At the film's conclusion, Melvin makes an impassioned speech about what a wonderful woman Carol is, thus winning her over and sending the audience home satisfied that the disabled person has rehabilitated himself by making strides with the pretty, nondisabled woman. Disability studies academics Thomas B. Hoeksema and Christopher R. Smit postulate that critics approaching their work through the lens of disability studies would actually bemoan this "pity approach" to disability that is heralded in many sentimental or melodramatic films, such as *As Good As It Gets* (Hoeksema and Smit 39). By the end of the film, Melvin embodies the loveable curmudgeon.

Whereas the audience for *The House That Jack Built* can breathe a sigh of relief at Jack's death (thereby removing the disability - the "monster" (Longmore 4) - from society), the audience for *As Good As It Gets* is allowed to reward itself for having endured Melvin's disability as he turns a corner and embarks on a likely romance with Carol, thereby removing any discomfort Melvin's disability might have caused for abled audiences. Either way, in both the horror-drama and the comedy-drama, the audience is freed from having to bear witness to a disabled person any longer: "the nondisabled audience is allowed to avoid confronting its own fears and prejudices" (7).

Conclusion. I saw *As Good As It Gets* in the theater upon its release in 1997. I recall thinking at the time, that what the film portrayed as Melvin's OCD was presented as though it were a loveable quirk, an endearing character tic. Consequently, my primary takeaway from the film was not the wonderful acting or some genuinely funny one-liners, but a feeling that I had somehow been mocked, that my lifelong struggle had been reduced to nothing more than a

cutesy and adorable bit of shtick. There was nothing cutesy and adorable about the countless times as a teenager that I got into and out of bed at night before finally willing myself to stay put, or washing my hands to the point of rawness where my knuckles would crack and bleed, or driving around town with my eyes concentrated on the rear view mirror rather than on the road in front of me for fear that I would accidentally run over someone and not feel it.

But when we view both *The House That Jack Built* and *As Good As It Gets* in the context of generic film, there is no conceivable way in which the two movies could present their characters' afflictions in a tonally similar manner. Jack's frustration and totally accurate exasperation that accompanies an OCD episode is more harrowing and visceral, in part due to the generic conventions of a horror film. On the other hand, presenting a character, even a character as ultimately tolerable as Melvin Udall, in a highly commercial comedy-drama and indulging popular presumptions about obsessive-compulsive disorder actually does a disservice to OCD sufferers. Hoeksema and Smit put forth as much, "We believe that it is inaccurate and insufficient to characterize cinematic depictions of disability as primarily negative and stereotypic" (Hoeksema and Smit 35).

Therefore, once we remove the element of genre, the fear and agitation that von Trier and Dillon instill in Jack's OCD proves to be a more accurate representation of the disquietude of obsessive-compulsive disorder.

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