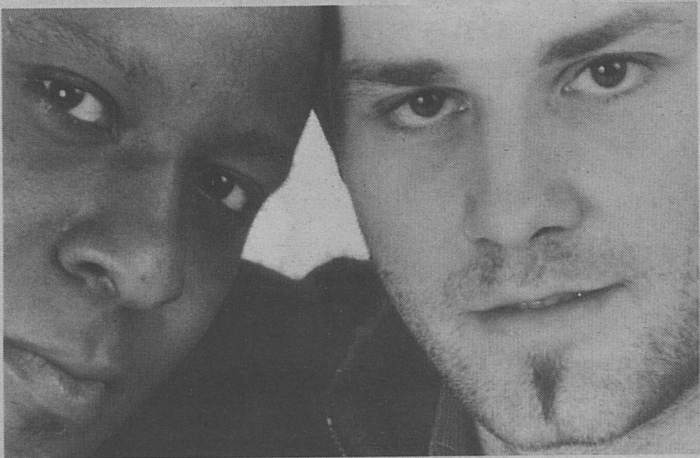


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It's better to know



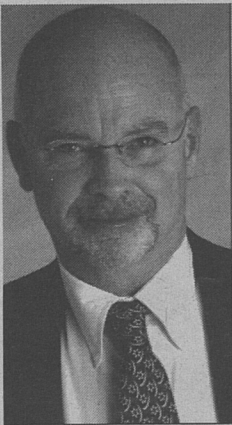
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- for hearing impaired TTY access
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- or visit us on-line at
<http://www.healthvermonters.info>

* The Vermont AIDS Hotline is open weekdays, 8:30-4:30.
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OUT in the MOUNTAINS

Culture Vulture: Boys on Film

anne
moore

If you went to the movies much in the 1980s and early 90s, then you're probably familiar with the stock Michael Douglas character – the Embattled White Guy. In movies like *Fatal Attraction*, *Basic Instinct* and *Falling Down*, he carries the banner for privileged white guys everywhere as he fights the forces of chaos as personified by women and people of color. He carries the burden fairly well, all things considered – his privilege doesn't come across as a burden, but just as the expected order of things, and the removal of threats to that privilege creates the resolution of the narrative.

In the last ten years or so, however, the Michael Douglas *oeuvre* has taken something of a beating – he's still playing essentially the same character, but has become more famous for those icky spreads in *People* where he's mooning with his child-bride Catherine Zeta-Jones over their new baby, and even his characters have become less powerful (like his ineffective drug czar in *Traffic*). This looks like good news – the figure of the Embattled White Guy has become less sympathetic, it would seem. However, like the interchangeable villainesses of *Fatal Attraction*, *Basic Instinct* and *Disclosure*, the Embattled White Guy has risen again, with a more benign face this time, but up to the same old tricks.

Right now, the mantle of privileged white guys everywhere seems to have been passed to Dennis Quaid, who is in my opinion a scarier representation of privilege than Michael Douglas ever was. Quaid's repertoire of roles looks pretty different from Douglas's – he emerges from narratives usually triumphant, but begins them from a much more vulnerable place than a Michael Douglas character.

In *The Rookie*, he plays an over-the-hill baseball player who makes his first stab at major-league play in his forties, after having long abandoned hope of a career in sports. In *The Day After Tomorrow*, he plays an absentee father who redeems himself by going on a cross-country trek across the frozen tundra of New

England (don't ask) to save his son. In all these movies, the patriarchal power he holds is surrounded by the textual equivalent of a candy coating of seeming vulnerability. Progressive viewers like me are less likely to question the power he gains because he acquires it from a disempowered position – a position that looks pretty familiar to the female/queer/non-white audience member, but is in fact profoundly different.

His newest film, *In Good Company*, cements for me his position as the Embattled White Guy for the new millennium. He plays a sales executive for a *Sports Illustrated*-type magazine who loses his job to a young upstart from a global multinational (Topher Grace) who, adding insult to injury, promptly begins sleeping with his daughter (Scarlett Johansson). True to formula, Quaid regains his job by the end of the movie, and the ethics of old-school corporate America triumph over globalization. More than in any of his other movies, Quaid is presented here as the paragon of American masculinity, presiding over his family as a firm but loving patriarch who truly cares about shilling ads for *Sports Illustrated*.

Because of his relatively vulnerable position throughout the movie, and since it's made very clear that he only wants whatever power he might gain in order to help his family, it's easy to miss the misogynist tone of much of the movie. The moral of *In Good Company* seems to be that if things could just go back to the way they were a generation ago when, according to the movie, corporate America was somehow nobler,

then people would be able to find meaning in their lives more easily.

In itself, this kind of message isn't so bad – after all, globalization pretty much sucks, right? However, the message is linked to the idea that it must by definition be men who hold this power, and that the right kind of corporate power is linked to the right kind of familial power – a kind that looks a lot like Ozzie and Harriet.

In a moment as blatantly misogynist as any tidy disposal of a villainess in a Michael Douglas movie, the final scene of *In Good Company* features Morty, a previously browbeaten ad exec, crowing to Topher Grace's character about how his wife (whom he has previously described as – I'm not kidding – wearing “the pants in the family”) lost her corporate job just as he was rehired at *Sports Illustrated*. The balance of power, it seems, has been “restored.”

I didn't walk-out of *In Good Company* with the same bad taste in my mouth that lingers after a Michael Douglas movie, though, and this is why I think Dennis Quaid is ultimately a more effective (and maybe more dangerous) conservative spokesman than Douglas. Instead of wanting to tear down the patriarchy, I just wanted to call my dad.

Michael Douglas movies begin with the assumption that the viewer endorses his position of power, while the object of a Dennis Quaid movie looks a lot more like conversion or recruitment. While the Michael Douglas movie seems aimed at other rich white men in positions of power, Dennis Quaid movies feels like they're aimed at me – the vaguely alienated kid of a corporate hotshot – with the goal of showing me how rough it is at the top. ▼

According to the *Culture Vulture* herself, if Anne Moore had an *oeuvre*, it would feature the figure 'Rocknroll Superstar.'