

Who Killed the Electric Car?

review by George Sax



SCENE FROM WHO KILLED THE ELECTRIC CAR?

Comedienne Phyllis Diller fondly remembers her family's electric car, circa 1920. "What happened to them?" she asks.

It's a question *Who Killed the Electric Car?* addresses in a much more recent context. In the very early years of the American automobile industry, electric batteries were the most prevalent power sources for automobiles. By Diller's childhood, the internal combustion engine had supplemented them.

We all know what environmental, geopolitical and other hazards reliance on gasoline engines has engendered, and this crisply effective documentary marshals the case again by relating a series of events that involved the struggle for a particular alternative.

In 1990, the California legislature enacted the Vehicle Zero Emission Mandate, a statutory plan for eventually reaching a complete absence of CO₂ production by motor vehicles. Automobile companies had been tinkering with electric propulsion for some years, and at several, especially General Motors, what looked like genuine efforts to translate studies into actual, marketable cars began.

By 1996, GM had ready the EV-1, an ostensibly practical vehicle for ordinary people.

GM chair Roger Smith—previously Michael Moore's stalkee—announced its appearance with appropriate fanfare. Relatively ordinary people and some distinctly out-of-the-ordinary ones leased the first electric cars and most of them gave the EV-1 their support. Mel Gibson promoted it. (Okay, maybe currently he's not the best example.) Tom Hanks joked to Dave Letterman that he was helping to save America.

Then this small tide turned, the result, argues director Chris Paine (through narrator Martin Sheen), of conspiratorial collaboration by the power, automobile and petroleum industries. The cars were taken back from enthusiastic drivers and most were scrapped. Why this happened is what Paine's film attempts to explain. In essence, it's an old story: Decades before, the auto industry and its allies had helped prevent Los Angeles from installing a rapid transit system.

Paine's case may not be airtight, but it's also not unpersuasive. Except for a blatantly truth-averse flack from GM, the alleged perps don't put up much of a defense.

It may be another version of an old story, but it's worth revisiting.

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MICHAEL PENA IN WORLD TRADE CENTER.

DOWNTOWN AGAIN, BUT NOT TO WALL STREET

World Trade Center

review by George Sax

Prior to this week's release of *World Trade Center*, there seemed to be about as much speculation buzzing around director Oliver Stone as there was about the movie itself. This was particularly interesting given the movie's provocative subject matter, the 9/11 attack in New York City.

The disproportion was almost wholly due to Stone's up-and-down record and reputation, and to understandable interest in how the sometimes free-wheeling filmmaker would handle such problematic material. Stone acknowledged the questions when he told a tabloid-TV interviewer that given what he called his "reputation for volatility," he felt he had to go "straight for the truth."

As it happens, Stone has largely held his proclivity for florid, frenzied melodrama in check. (He'd been toning things down in recent years, anyway.) *WTC* instead offers him some latitude for his awkwardly masculinized sentimentality. The movie, after all, is about two men, Sgt. John McLoughlin and Officer Will Jimeno of the Port Authority Police Department, who survived the cataclysmic collapse of the World Trade Center's north and south towers, becoming almost the very last of the very few who were rescued from the hellish post-collapse site.

The movie isn't a recreation of the attack or its horrific general consequences. It's the story of the terrible, unlikely experiences of these two, their stoic courage,

and the varieties of response, including heroism, of the people who were closest to them, and of people they'd never met before.

WTC delivers on a fair amount of its self-limited potential, including the inevitable inspirational message. It follows the conventions of epochal historical fiction, literary and cinematic, except that for the most part it isn't fiction.

McLoughlin and Jimeno (Nicolas Cage and Michael Pena, respectively) are from the start at the center of the movie, as they rush to the Trade Center after the twin strikes at the buildings from the sky. The movie's first half hour is really its best section. The New York City scene is set quickly and effectively (aided, of course, by our nervously informed expectation of what is to ensue). The Port Authority officers reach the scene of horror and havoc and try to steel themselves against the terrorized confusion. The movie follows them into the north tower and down to the concourse level (their location isn't clear) and then their engulfment in the force-driven, detritus-filled nebula from the south tower's collapse, and their virtual entombment in its broken remains.

Expertly managed, this extended dynamically involving sequence is the only opportunity Stone got to create the strikingly compelling effects at which he's always been adept. Thereafter, he had to expand the movie's scope to encompass the anguished reactions and other behaviors of the trapped men's families, and to transfer *WTC*'s action from the underground confines to the New York suburbs and back again, repeatedly. This makes for a somewhat cumbersome operation, and it's only a little lessened by the acutely effective performances of Maria Bello (Donna McLoughlin) and Maggie Gyllenhaal (Alison Jimeno).

Stone had to try to integrate the terrible but mostly static and isolated plight of the two officers with scenes of the distraught, uninformed tension at their homes. The effect domesticates the horror, to some extent. This is also patently meant to be an inspiring project, not a docu-dramatic recounting of the 24 hours following the attack.

Stone succeeds in keeping *WTC* on track much of the time, but sometimes it slows to a crawl. He resorts to flashbacks and psychic phantasms to convey the two men's experience of what is a largely unimaginable ordeal, but they're a little clumsy and uninvolved.

It's difficult to imagine what Stone would have made of this story had he been given more independence, but he had to accept a script written by fledgling scenarist Andrea Berloff before he was hired. Stone's sensibility hasn't often proved conducive to balancing character, plotting and message. It's far from certain that he would have come up with something better. Different, no doubt, but not necessarily better.

WTC's portrayal of the remarkable ad-hoc rescue efforts of several men is tauntly engrossing but peculiarly unbalanced. David Karnes (Michael Shannan), an accountant and former marine, traveled to Ground Zero from Connecticut on his own zealous initiative and conducted a lonely search for survivors with two men he chanced to meet. One of these, an ex-paramedic named Chuck Sereika (Frank Whaley), had an even more emotionally involving story to tell, but Stone and Berloff slight it to concentrate on the heroic but martially eccentric Karnes.

Despite its backdrop of soaring tragedy and searing horror, *WTC* is essentially a small movie.

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