



DVD: Hubert Selby Jr - It/Il Be Better Tomorrow (2005)

Review Rating: Very Good
Label/Studio: MVD Visual
Catalog #: EDD-02082
Region: 1 (NTSC)
Released: March 13, 2007



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Genre: Documentary
Synopsis: In-depth biography and career overview of iconic American writer Hubert Selby Jr.

Directed by: Michael W. Dean, Kenneth Shiffrin
Screenplay by: n/a
Music by: Martyn Lenoble, Bob Bartosik, Imperial Crowns
Produced by: Michael W. Dean, Ryan Brown
Cast: Hubert Selby Jr., Ellen Burtsyn, Lou Reed, Darren Aronofsky, Uli Edel, Nicolas Winding Refn, Richard Price, Jerry Stahl, Nick Tosches, Gilbert Sorrentino, Henry Rollins, Amiri Baraka, James Ragan, Jared Leto, James Remar, Anthony Kiedis, Michael Silverblatt, Robert Downey Jr. (narration).

Film Length: 79 mins **Process/Ratio:** 1.33:1
Colour: **Anamorphic DVD:** No

Languages: English Dolby 2.0

Subtitles:

Special Features :

Archival/Raw Audio Galley (4): 2003 Interviews with Author Hubert Selby Jr. (32:40) and (75:15) + Director Uli Edel (24:04) + Literary Critic Michael Silverblatt (49:16)

Comments :

"Part of Selby's place... in literary history is his absence from it. He's the case of a writer who essentially wrote himself off the map of American literature."


-Michael Silverblatt, Host, "Bookworm" show, KCRW, Public Radio

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Among the myriad interviews in this superb documentary, filmmaker Nicolas Winding Refn makes a morbidly amusing point when he recalls his own surprise that people assumed Hubert Selby Jr. was dead, which of course he wasn't, because Refn subsequently co-wrote the film version of **Fear X** with Selby in 2003.

Selby *then* he died in 2004, at the age of 75.

The perception of, if not the total belief in Selby's imminent mortality is perhaps the key recurring

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theme of the author's life, going back to an incident during WWII in which he suffered a vicious bout of TB that doctors figured would quickly kill him. After 3 years in a sanitarium, he licked the disease, but his soul was forever locked up in a fragile body that moved towards a kind of physical desiccation.

In 1964 he wrote his breakthrough novel, **Last Exit to Brooklyn**, and went on a drug and alcohol binge until going clean in the late sixties. After a series of brutal, critically acclaimed novels, Selby wrote **Requiem for a Dream** in 1978, followed by the film script in 2000. Then came plenty of media attention – but not all of it came from his own countrymen. Unlike American jazz greats, Selby himself stayed in the U.S., but aside from a core group of fans and literary critics, his published work was mostly lauded in Europe, albeit somewhat aided by an obscenity charge in England that boosted the sales of **Last Exit**.

Even the movie of that novel – seen in the doc via pristine extracts from a European DVD – was produced by a German company, while **Fear X** was largely financed by Danish and Norwegian funds. In both cases, Selby's reputation still wasn't big enough for Hollywood 's major studios, but the results were a pair of unique films, with **Last Exit** resonating some of the ugliness that bled from Selby's dense novel. (There's no way a major studio would've funded a film with such a graphic, nihilistic finale that left audiences pretty much shell-shocked.)

The doc's divided into a handful of chapters that candidly cover his life and work, and while his bouts with depression and substance abuse are an important component, the motivator of Selby's decision to become sober is tied to a pretty hard thought that pushed him to become a writer: 'Do you really want to die old with nothing tied to your name, or do you want to leave a mark of some measure?'

Filmmakers Michael Dean and Kenneth Shiffryn remain largely non-judgmental because the plethora of interviews offer enough opinions on Selby's persona, and how this otherwise non-threatening figure wrote such potent and stylized prose. The directors gathered interviews with literary critics, fellow authors who were themselves inspired by Selby's ballsy language and idiosyncratic typography, filmmakers who worked with him in an extraordinarily respectful manor, and actors who recall Selby's presence on film sets.

The most fascinating couplet comes from Ellen Burstyn and Jared Leto, both of whom describe moments when Selby read sections from **Requiem** to help the actors get into character and understand their scenes before a take – an unheard of action, since authors are often banished from any involvement with the filming of their work, and are regarded as meddling to expensive properties studios want to keep commercial and accessible.

Selby himself appears throughout the doc in various states of disintegration, yet the spirit that drove his agile mind to write novels and share his knowledge with students in his later years radiates from his eyes, and the doc uses video and audio clips from various sources to contrast Selby's self-assessments with those of his admirers.

It/II Be Better Tomorrow was previously released as a bonus item on the British Region 2 PAL 2-disc set of **Last Exit**, but it seems MVD Visual's standalone disc includes about 3 hours of audio from the taped interviews with Selby, literary critic Michael Silverblatt, and director Uli Edel, director of the uncompromising film version of **Last Exit**.

Dean and Shiffryn's film is a perfect balance of biography and analysis of an artists' work; certainly one of the first things viewers will think of doing after popping the DVD back into the case is picking up one of Selby's books and giving it a try.

Whereas the film version of **Requiem for a Dream** is available in North America, as of this writing, **Last Exit to Brooklyn** and **Fear X** are only available as Region 2 releases, and Ludovic Cantais' 2000 documentary, **Hubert Selby Jr., 2 ou 3 choses...**, excerpted throughout Dean and Shiffryn's film, remained unavailable on home video.

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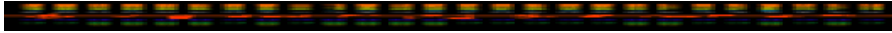


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