

MILES AHEAD

A film by Don Cheadle

Off the Couch, April 19, 2016

Discussion led by Howard Katz, M.D.

I. “If you’re gonna tell a story, come with attitude, man.”

So begins Don Cheadle’s movie and so it ends, with this advice to an interviewer from Miles Davis (played by Cheadle). In his autobiography, Miles stated, “A musician’s **attitude is the music he plays.**”

In Cheadle’s film depiction of Miles Davis, he “comes with **attitude**” about his subject, that attitude comprised of **a feeling, a tone** ---- It is expressed not only by the acting and cinematography but by the **form** of the film itself, one that is unconventional for a biopic of a musical artist.

Miles Davis once protested against liner notes on his albums: “The music speaks for itself.” Cheadle lets the visual imagery and music speak for itself to convey what Miles Davis was about - more than he relies on a “true” narrative of the man’s life.

In fact, the “story” in the film, of two days of turmoil and conflict over possession of an unreleased tape of new music, a conflict among outrageous characters, replete with dramatic fights, gunshots and car chases, is a complete invention. It never happened. Nothing like it ever happened. But it captures, **as do elements of dreams**, the inner reality and the struggles of the jazz master feeling anything but masterful at that point in his life, at age 54 or so, around 1980.

II. Psychoanalysts see current conflicts and challenges as evoking memory of and resonances with struggles of earlier life.

Cheadle’s cinematic devices and the continuity of his performance relate this contrived “moment” in 1980 to other parts of Miles’s life, anchored by scenes from his charged, conflicted relationship with his wife Frances, that, in turn, touches aspect of Davis’s character from adolescence, that are not depicted here. But they need not be depicted to paint a picture of Miles, **for we feel them as they are evoked by the imagery.**

III. Consider the dream-like aspect of this film.

In dreams,

- the fantastic may be merged with more realistic representation.
- Meaning is conveyed less with words and more with imagery (mostly visual, but to large extent auditory/music here)

- present experience touches images of the past, particularly as guided by the dominant emotion,
- time sense is suspended or distorted.

While the “real time” story of these two days is a total fiction, it is set in a realistic representation of where and how Miles lived near the end of his very real period of withdrawal from “the scene,” from meaningful relationships and from any artistic production.

This composite of fiction and fact is a lightning rod for deeper emotional undercurrents and Miles’s ideas of himself in relation to the world. We see Miles in his life-long struggle to define and re-define and to take ownership of himself.

The inseparability of present and past is conveyed when we see Miles, after a confrontation with the music company executives, up against the wall of the elevator with covers of his great LP’s and the back wall swings open like a door to the past – Suddenly he is performing in a club (still dream-like in ways) and we enter a world of memory, particularly related to his relationship with Francis.

As this and other scenes are set, **music is at the center, as it always was for Miles.** He expressed himself in music but the music could also get in the way of other needs of his and the needs of others. Miles’s need to put music first and his hunger for the new, not just in art but in relationships, undermined his ability to be steady in any of his relationships with women - Frances, as we see depicted in this film, and others, including the mothers of his children. He wasn’t there much for them, either.

Davis could be abusive and neglectful. He argued against accusations of misogyny, but, clearly, he both loved and hated women and could not easily channel his passions.

IV. TIME - Dreams often condense multiple registrations of past, present and anticipated future experience.

Cheadle’s “dream” of Miles Davis condenses and compresses emotional experience with fluid seamless cuts between scenes of the fictive “present” of those two days of 1980 and scenes depicting the memories of past experiences and feelings.

An emotional tone, an “attitude,” permeates the imagery with elements of:

- awe and reverence for a great innovative artist,
- a feeling, ambivalently held, of Miles as “the Dark Prince,” as he was called by some
- the sense of Miles as “badass” (with both positive and negative connotations), living in defiance of racist domination by the white bosses of the music industry and America as a whole

The culmination of the drama in the fight ring is a marvelous fantastic condensation of images of Miles fighting against the man physically, playing aggressive, powerful and beautiful riffs on the trumpet with musicians in the ring, boxers locked in combat, the fight and shooting of the men who were ripping him off. As spectators flee from this aggression, we see Frances among them, in a reprise of “running for my life,” as she did a few minutes earlier in a flashback - and as she did in real life.

The feeling comes across of this beautiful, flawed, creative, volatile man, so unwilling to be boxed in by a label of what kind of jazz, be-bop, post-bop, cool, modal, fusion, or by the label *jazz*, itself. Or, most importantly, by the label *nigger*.

(The incident of his brutalization outside a club depicts an actual traumatic experience Miles Davis had – but where does it come into Miles’s mind in the course of the film? - where in Don Cheadle’s thinking as he places it there for us? - and where in all our minds as we see it through our contemporary lens on Ferguson, MO, a few miles from the Davis family’s hometown of East St. Louis, IL?)

Through it all, **the music ties it together**. So, we hear “Black Lives Matter” among the words of the rap of the last music, after we have seen Cheadle/Miles of the 80’s jamming with band-mates from his second great quintet, Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter, and with young players like Esperanza Spalding, born around the time Miles died in 1991. (I found this very moving, and could somehow place myself there – spanning 50 years! - having seen Miles Davis in the 1960’s with that band and having seen the young (and Protean, like Miles) Esperanza, just a week before seeing this film.)

Time.... here compressed and condensed as when we dream for the subject, Miles Davis, for the director, Don Cheadle, for me and other viewers – It is little wonder that the film ends with the traditional dates birth and death – oh, no date of death...Miles lives on, we are told, we are shown, in his music.