

# Land of Plenty (2004)

Rated NR. Running time: 1 hour: 18 min.

Our content ratings (0 – 10): Violence 3; Language 5;  
Sex/Nudity 1.

Our star rating (0-5): 4.5

*Deal bountifully with your servant,  
so that I may live and observe your word.*

*Open my eyes, so that I may behold  
wondrous things out of your law.*

*I live as an alien in the land;  
do not hide your commandments from me.*

*Psalms 119:17-19*

German director Wim Wenders (remember his spiritually infused *Wings of Desire*?) examines the mood of post 9/11 America through two very different characters in this thought-provoking film. Paul's (John Diehl) world is a paranoid one, well summed up when he declares, "They're trying to destroy our country. They're trying to infect us. I'm not going to let them." A Vietnam War vet damaged by Agent Orange and its derivatives, he spends his days drinking or taking drugs and driving around the streets of L.A. using his high tech surveillance equipment to spy on "rag heads" that he spots. He is determined to prevent what he is convinced will be the next attack, this time upon his own city.

It is 2004 when the second anniversary of the destruction of the Twin Towers and the assault on the Pentagon is about to be observed, and Lana (Michelle Williams) is flying back to

America after being away for several years with her missionary parents in Africa, and more recently in Israel. She utters a quiet prayer of thanksgiving just as the plane is getting ready to land at L.A. She is on a mission bearing the last letter that her now deceased mother had written in the hope of reconciling with the brother from whom she has been estranged because of their conflicting political views. While searching for her uncle Lana plans to stay at the inner city mission run by family friend Henry (Wendell Pierce). The uncle, of course, is Paul.

Lana is dismayed at the changes she sees in the land of her birth. The streets of L.A. that she observes are far different from the ones usually depicted in Hollywood films. No fancy shops along Rodeo Drive or lavish mansions in Beverly Hills, just boarded up shops and homeless men and women gathered under bridges or sleeping at night in cardboard boxes and plastic garbage bags, hence the irony of the title, when Henry refers to the city as "the hunger capital of America." Lana helps serve the food in the mission dining room in between her searches for her uncle. It is the tragic shooting of a Middle Eastern whom she had served that brings the two together.

Paul had spotted the man, whom Lana had learned earlier that day was named Hassan (Shaun Toub), and followed to the mission. Convinced, because the man had been carrying two cases marked Borax, that he was gathering materials similar to what Oklahoma bomber Timothy McVeigh had used, Paul had followed in his van and parked outside the mission when his quarry had gone inside to eat. That night when Hassan was killed in a drive-by shooting right outside the mission, Paul is certain that the man was assassinated because he knew too much. He is not at all happy over being reunited with his niece, but later accepts her offer of help when she tells him that she knows the victim's name. Paul sends to the major TV stations the surveillance tape he had made of the shooting. The two discover that Hassan has a brother in a desert town

where there is a chemical plant. Through church connections Henry and Lana learn how to contact the man, named Youssef (Bernard White). She agrees that she will travel with Paul and bring Hassan's body there for burial. So off they go in Paul's van to Death Valley, he believing that they will at last discover the group threatening his city with destruction.

As with the already mentioned *Wings of Desire*, Wim Wenders, teaming with scriptwriter Scott Derrickson (the original story was Wenders'), invests his film with a gentle spirituality that stands in such stark contrast to Paul's damaged psyche. Lana prays frequently, and we listen in on one of Henry's sermons in which he assures the homeless congregation that God loves and walks with them. There is no showy piety in either Lana or Henry, just a quiet faith that makes her prayers into conversations in which she seems to be talking with an older, wiser friend. This is a film perfectly designed for church groups and leaders.

#### For Reflection/Discussion

*There are spoilers in this section, so wait until you have seen the film before reading further.*

1) How does Paul demonstrate that war has its effects on its participants long after the guns have ceased fire? What must his private life be like—or does he even have one apart from his surveillance mission?

2) Compare Lana with her uncle? At first glance she might appear to be the naive innocent, but is she? What must she have seen in Africa? What does the exchange of emails with her boyfriend (?) in Israel reveal what she must have experienced when she lived on the West bank?

3) How is Henry portrayed? We are shown nothing of his personal life: do you think that he is like Paul, in that he is totally immersed in his mission of compassion?

4) A good preaching/teaching scene is in the serving line when the homeless man angrily reacts to Lana's attempt to be friendly, and she surprises him by revealing that she does know his name. What do we see at the mission indicating that she is cut out for that kind of ministry?

5) How does Lana react on her ride from the airport when she sees so many homeless people? Check out the deleted scenes, one of which shows her going back to try to find the woman whose plight had moved her. How does this show that we must act when the opportunity to help confronts us?

6) How is Paul infected with the stereotypical view of Middle Easterners that so many Americans hold, especially since 9/11? What instances of this have you experienced?

7) How are we led to believe that we are watching a thriller? What does the story suggest about presumptions and circumstantial evidence?

8) How did you feel when Paul and Lana traveled to New York to visit the site of the attack? How is Paul's feeling similar to what he must have felt when he discovered the real reason for the Borax boxes that had made him so suspicious? Did the film's abrupt ending disappoint you, or can you see it as a way in which the filmmaker is inviting the audience to participate in working out its own resolution? How is what Lana says to her uncle a bit like verse 10 of Psalm 46? How does the Leonard Cohen song we hear playing on the soundtrack add to the film?

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