

JANUARY 14

Far from the spotlights, the shadows of losers

A system glorifies its winners. The mass media and the rest of corporate America are enthralled with professionals scaling career ladders to new heights. Meanwhile, the people hanging onto bottom rungs are scarcely blips on screens.

Far from the media spotlights are countless lives beset with financial scarcity, often in tandem with chronic illness, monotony, adversity and despair. The same institutions and attitudes that lavish outsized respect on high achievers (the wealthier the better) are apt to convey ongoing disrespect for low achievers.

The flip side of adulation for winners is often contempt for people with cumulative misfortune, who routinely slog through murky quasi-netherworlds and do their best to keep from going under. According to mass-media calculations, they just don't rate. In a society overdosing on unmitigated capitalism, it's not just a matter of scant disposable income. As a practical matter, the country treats many people as disposable.

When personal dreams of success or even equilibrium sink below horizons, the same media outlets that laud the successful have little use for those defined by the system as abject failures. For mainstream media, the plentiful underachievers are customarily the rough equivalent of flotsam and jetsam.

The downwardly un-mobile may pump gas, wash dishes, trim hedges or do any number of other low-pay no-benefit jobs. They might rent a tiny run-down apartment, sleep in charity shelters or bed down on urban cement; they may wait in emergency rooms or clinics, merely shaking their heads at the immediate question that prompts most Americans to show medical-insurance cards.

In human terms, they may be the salt of the earth, but the corporate-driven system commonly treats them like dirt. And for many of those who've been on a downward spiral for a long time, there's not the slightest whiff of a happy ending. Media disdain for such lives is most vehemently expressed by ignoring them; in the routine calculus of the newsroom, nonpersons get non-coverage.

If you see the new movie "The Assassination of Richard Nixon," you might feel compelled to think again about such matters – and maybe in a new way. Inspired by a real

MEDIABEAT 2005 | NORMAN SOLOMON

person named Samuel Byck who went through a personal meltdown 30 years ago, this stunning film makes more difficult our usual psychological evasions about people whose failures include inability to pull themselves out of tailspins.

You may never see a more powerful performance on a screen than the one in this movie by Sean Penn. (Full disclosure: He's a friend.) I agree with Newsday reviewer Jan Stuart, who wrote that the film is "a triumph for its star and the writers, who make us cringe with empathy for a man who taps into the latent loser in all of us."

It isn't just that we would rather not contemplate the dire circumstances of others. We also would prefer not to look too closely at the thin ice that is underfoot for us all. Even the most secure have no guarantees of health, stability or longevity.

While reviews across the country are almost unanimous with praise for Sean Penn's superb acting in "The Assassination of Richard Nixon," their reactions to the overall film have ranged from acclaim to indifference. The discomfort of some reviewers seems to be intertwined with wariness about the movie's great empathy for someone who can't win.

The marriage that the film's main character desperately wants to glue back together has cracked up beyond repair. The political economy that he hopes will welcome and reward his honest work has no use for him. All the outward signposts tell us that he's headed toward the system's destination for what it treats as expendable – the equivalent of corporate road kill. And his mental deterioration leads him to engage in terrible violence.

Director Niels Mueller, who co-wrote "The Assassination of Richard Nixon" with Kevin Kennedy, has brought to the screen a work of creativity that finds politics in humanity. Given its acute sensibilities, the film is remarkable enough to represent a bit of a cinematic miracle.

Maybe fuller realization of vulnerabilities that are inherent in the human condition – and exacerbated by predatory social orders – can bring more genuine humility and deeper compassion.

Norman Solomon's next book, "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death," will be published in early summer by Wiley.