

Flashback

To know nothing of what happened before you were born
is to remain ever a child—Cicero



They Voted Against Mother's Day

In the annals of easy votes, one might expect to find a prominent place for the congressional resolution to establish Mother's Day. Yet the first Mother's Day legislation was actually hooted down.

Mother's Day was the brainchild of Anna Jarvis, a Philadelphia woman stricken with grief over the death of her saintly mother in May 1905. Two years later, Miss Jarvis organized memorial services for her mother. Then, in one of those mad boundless leaps taken only by the most creative holiday entrepreneurs, Anna Jarvis went national. She decided that henceforth, on the anniversary of her mother's death, *all* Americans ought to honor the women who gave them birth.

In May 1908, freshman Senator Elmer Burkett (R-NE) put Miss Jarvis's proposal before his colleagues. It was not a Hallmark moment.

The senator explained that Mother's Day legislation was a special request of the Young Men's Christian Association, which, he noted, was doing valiant work in the "gathering together of the boys for social intercourse." (A theme later elaborated upon by the Village People in their timeless disco tribute.) Mother's Day, said Senator Burkett, would remind "boys from the country who are in the cities and among strangers" to think of "the old homes they left behind and the mothers who gave them birth."

Senator Burkett's mawkish but sincere discourse was met by a hail of mockery. The neophyte legislator was astonished by the ridicule heaped upon his innocent proposal. "I did not expect that a single objection would be offered,"

he averred; he was offended to hear "light made of it" by his gray colleagues.

Senator John Kean (R-NJ) immediately moved to amend Burkett's measure by striking everything after "Resolved" and substituting the Fifth Commandment: "Honor thy father and thy mother."

Senator Henry Moore Teller (D-CO) scorned the resolution as "puerile," "absolutely absurd," and "trifling." He announced, "Every day with me is a mother's day."

Senator Jacob Gallinger (R-NH) judged the very idea of Mother's Day to be an insult, as though his memory of his late mother "could only be kept green by some outward demonstration on Sunday, May 10."

"There are some thoughts that are so great and so sacred that they are belittled by movements of this character," lectured Senator Charles Fulton (R-OR), who went on to suggest the consecration of "Mother-in-Law Day."

Besides—and this objection may strike modern ears as especially bizarre—whether or not young men honored their mothers was *none of the federal government's business*.

"It is not a proper subject for legislation," declared Weldon Heyburn (R-ID). "The sentiment that exists between the parent and the child" is "too sacred to be made the subject of bandying words" and symbolic and un-Constitutional legislative resolutions.

By a margin of 33-14, the Senate contemptuously returned this first Mother's Day resolution to committee. But a few Constitutionalist pettifoggers

were not going to stop Anna Jarvis. She enlisted the potent support of the World's Sunday School Association. By 1914, members of Congress were falling all over each other in praise of a federally sanctioned day of maternal homage. Mother's Day, celebrated on the second Sunday of May, was here to stay. (The logical companion to Mother's Day, Father's Day, took decades to catch on, despite assiduous propagandizing by the necktie industry.)

But a funny thing happened on the way to the florist. Anna Jarvis, the mother of Mother's Day, became its harshest critic.

Jarvis denounced the greeting-card and gift and candy manufacturers who batted on her day. In vain, she urged sons and daughters to stop buying flowers for mom; she called greeting cards "a poor excuse for the letter you are too lazy to write." The embittered Jarvis concluded that "charlatans, bandits, pirates, racketeers, kidnappers and other termites" had corrupted "with their greed one of the finest, noblest, truest Movements and celebrations known."

The spinster Jarvis, who never had children, died alone in a Pennsylvania nursing home. She had come to agree with those early Senate critics who derided the establishment of a national Mother's Day. Clergymen sympathetic to Jarvis urged that Americans shun the commercial interests and honor their mothers with a hand-picked dandelion and either a hug or a hand-written letter.

Sons and daughters are still free to take their advice.

—Bill Kauffman



Audrey Tautou in Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amélie*.

Why Elites Hate Sweet *Amélie*

Film critics with a highly political bent always run the risk of being out of touch. But they've looked especially ludicrous denouncing the popular recent movie import *Amélie*. The highest-grossing French movie in North American history, and the favorite to win as Best Foreign Language Film at the upcoming Academy Awards, *Amélie* has become a punching bag for the sort of politicized, elitist critics who could ascribe a Marxist subtext to the most innocuous Disney cartoon.

The fuss they've created seems silly once you've watched the movie in question. A whimsical modern parable about a shy Parisian waitress (Audrey Tautou) who finds happiness by performing anonymous acts of kindness for her neighbors, *Amélie* is about as political as a nursery rhyme. If the movie is "about" anything, it's an ode to appreciating life's little pleasures, a notion that's reinforced each time director Jean-Pierre Jeunet introduces a character by sharing his or her "likes" (*Amélie* herself likes "cracking crème brûlée with a teaspoon").

In reality, *Amélie* is an invigorating pleasure. Aside from Tautou's spirited performance, the bold colors and impulsive edits that define Jeunet's directing style bring an eye-popping sense of optimism to the screen. It's a feel-good movie all right, but one in which the good feelings are earned, not manipulated by cheap sentiment. Heaven forbid a film should want us to feel good; apparently that's yet another pleasure that zealous political correctness would seek to deny everyday people.

What could possibly be stirring up the P.C. crowd? According to some left-wing critics, thousands of moviegoers are blind to the movie's reactionary racism—evidenced by the fact that *Amélie* takes place in a stylized, picturesque Paris with clean streets and primarily white characters. Writing in *Film Comment*, French critic Frederic Bonnaud describes such a milieu as a "retro postcard version of France, undeniably cleansed of all cultural diversity and, by extension, all immigrants." Never mind that the filmmakers aren't trying to create a realistic piece of *cinéma vérité*. Bonnaud seems to think that even movie fantasies should be subject to affirmative action.

Taking a cue from their French counterparts, highbrow American critics were laying in wait for *Amélie* when it hit these shores. The *Chicago Reader* compared the movie's supposed "revisionism" to *Forrest Gump*, another popular favorite that's been sniffed at as secretly reactionary by the critical elite. "The ease with which the perky, big-eyed heroine ingeniously succeeds in improving the lot of everyone around her, and the painterly manner in which reality in every inch of the frame is 'improved' constitute both the 'quirky' charm and the pure fishiness of the film," writes reviewer Ronnie Scheib. If the heroine had instead been a homeless African immigrant who's too miserable to do anyone any favors, Scheib would undoubtedly have been happier.

There's a bias here against the tastes of the general public that is deeply uncinematic (as well as undemocratic). Movies

have always been an art form of the people and for the people—they're meant for mass audiences. Sometimes those audiences will grant a coarse, common-denominator film huge box office rewards; but there are also many times when a good movie will strike a massive chord with broad common tastes.

For all their talk of inclusion, *Amélie*'s critics aren't really interested in common sense and broad tastes—especially when they involve common people. (Bonnaud admits as much in his *Film Comment* piece when he says he saw *Amélie* long after its initial release due to "total indifference to the film's box-office success.") There's nothing more threatening to an intellectual critic than a good movie that mass audiences don't need explained to them.

For all of its own faults, the Academy Awards process can provide a middle ground between the snobbery of politicized critics and the hurly-burly of pop entertainment. The Oscars have always been a mishmash of highbrow tastes and public appeal; the ideal Best Picture candidate is an epic with both glowing reviews and a big box office. Hollywood loves to have it both ways.

For *Amélie*, this means that thousands of tickets sold, and generous reviews from the mainstream press, virtually guarantee a gold statue. But for P.C. elitists, the professionally alienated, and critics who hold politics above art, this gentle and kindly tale is just something else to be derided.

—Josh Larsen