

give too lightly the people who ruined the Mass."

Now what can you do with that, except to quote it? It's part of the reviewer's task to explicate, to summarize, to quote economically. Yet how do you do that here? Where do you insert that convenient tool, the ellipsis? I see only two words which are unessential, but removing even those would damage the rhythms of the sentences in which they occur. Several phrases could be dropped, but at the expense of stylistic and substantive subtlety.

Far better to let it stand whole and speak for itself, a perfect mini-essay, combining humor and high seriousness. It's a funny piece. But it's also a serious

piece, the subject being God, and how we praise Him and talk to Him. I know of no more serious subject.

The subject is also standards, and the relationships between form and standards, between inspiration and form. It is a happy piece, because Buckley is a happy man, a man who knows who he is and what he is and where he is going, a man who can laugh at the prospect of his own death, for death is the happy beginning of a true Christian life.

It is also a satirical piece, of course, for the man of standards in an imperfect world must either surrender to tears or adopt a satirical attitude, and by so doing hope, by mocking their follies, to nudge his brothers back toward

those standards they tend to stray from.

It is also a sad piece, for although the man of standards may be happy in himself, he must necessarily grieve at the collapse of those standards in the world around him and at the collapse of those forms that symbolize those standards.

And finally the essay is a construct. It meets the most exacting literary standards, a perfect wedding of content—or perhaps life—and form. As the New Critics used to like to say, form is content. And it very well may be.

This little essay on the liturgy is typical of the best of Buckley. And it explains why I think William Buckley is the best writer of nonfiction prose practicing today. □

## The Talkies



by  
Robert  
Asahina

### One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

Certain "cult" novels and films have had the power to embody as well as define the political and cultural essence of recent decades. One need scarcely be reminded of *Catcher in the Rye* in the 1950s, and if *Easy Rider* was the quintessential movie of the 1960s, the novel that seemed most directly tied to that decade's collective unconscious was Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. First published in 1962, it prophetically prefigured—and, in so doing, influenced—the rise of the counterculture that was to emerge in the next few years. Kesey's prescient novel, set in an insane asylum, explicitly delineated the political and cultural themes that were to become dominant in the '60s: the rebellious anti-authoritarianism, the drug culture, the uneasy alliance between political revolution and psychedelic experience, and—most of all—the "politics of madness," in which insanity (especially schizophrenia) is seen as the only "sane" response to a repressive, institutionalized, and technological society.

After 13 years, Kesey's prophetic parable has been made into what appears to be a cult movie for the 1970s. It is rare for a cult movie to be made from a cult novel, and rarer still for one to be made successfully. Although the new movie, starring Jack Nicholson, is superior in many respects to the novel, it is also less satisfying—a seeming paradox grounded in crucial differences between the two, differences that reveal a great deal about the time that has lapsed between the

writing of the novel and the making of the movie. The differences are not those of the literary versus the cinematic, but those of the '60s versus the '70s.

To take an important example: The intervening 13 years have been marked by a remarkable shift in cultural attitudes toward women. In the novel, the arch-enemy of the hero, McMurphy, is Nurse Ratched—who is known as the "Big Nurse"; and it is clear that Kesey intended her to represent the rationalistic and civilizing (therefore, "feminine" and castrating) force which robs men of their individualistic and animalistic (therefore, "masculine" and powerful) nature. McMurphy describes his fellow inmates in the book as "victims of a matriarchy," and Kesey's Big Nurse is the embodiment of the grotesque parody of womanhood that accords with such a misogynist's view—a parody possible, perhaps, in a decade still emerging from what others had characterized as an era of "Momism," but scarcely credible in our "enlightened" decade.

Indeed, it has been reported that Anne Bancroft, Angela Lansbury, Geraldine Page, Colleen Dewhurst, and Ellen Burstyn all turned down the movie role of the Big Nurse. It is a credit to the direction of Milos Forman and the superb acting of Louise Fletcher that the change in cultural attitudes has been so skillfully rendered in the movie as a change in sensibility. Fletcher's Big Nurse is no longer an ogre, but rather a bland, impersonal,

and nearly faceless administrator—a bureaucratic embodiment of the banality, rather than the monstrosity, of evil.

But this transformation of Nurse Ratched's character poses some difficulties. In the novel, the Big Nurse was a "high official" of "The Combine"—Kesey's paranoid conception of an Establishment which manipulates and controls people both inside and outside the asylum. But although the cinematic Big Nurse is more of a bureaucratic type than her literary counterpart, the bureaucracy itself has vanished in the movie—there is no Combine, and the paranoids don't have a real Establishment to fear. This elimination of one of the central themes of the novel was necessary, perhaps, because of the difference between the cynicism of the '70s and the freewheeling and almost naive paranoia of the '60s, but it leads one to wonder what it is that the movie McMurphy is battling against—since it isn't the Matriarchy and it isn't The Combine—and what it is he's battling for.

Unfortunately, though with no discredit to his acting, Nicholson provides no answers in his portrayal of the rebel McMurphy. The transformation of the character of McMurphy is the third crucial difference between the novel and the movie. In the novel, McMurphy is a six-foot, red-haired, brawling he-man—a sort of hip Paul Bunyan. Appropriately, when *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was produced as a play, Kirk Douglas

played the lead. But that was a decade ago, and now such a characterization would be as corny as the conception of the Big Nurse in the novel would be grotesque and unbelievable.

Instead of Paul Bunyan, Nicholson plays the punk who's wised up, the wiry s.o.b. who's just a few years past his prime. In a sense, Nicholson is no less "All American" than Kirk Douglas—it's just that our notion of an "All American" has changed. In the novel, it is clear not only what McMurphy is battling against, but also what he is battling for—the manhood of his fellow inmates. He is not merely a liberator, but a saviour and a redeemer. But Nicholson brings such a sly and studied ambiguity to his characterization of McMurphy that the issues that were clearcut in the novel have become blurred in the film. This is not to suggest that the novel is somehow "better" than the film—in fact, just the reverse is the case, if we limit our consideration to the simpleness of much of the novel: The male/female and individual/institution conflicts are depicted in crude fashion, and the hero and the villain, who

have been described by some critics as "archetypes," are really little more than cartoon figures. The movie does, indeed, bring a refreshing realism and sophistication to what is basically an overblown psychedelic/religious comic book.

But along with this sophistication, the movie introduces an ambiguity, not found in the novel, concerning artistic purpose. Kesey clearly intended the asylum to be a metaphor for society as a whole and regarded McMurphy as a hero triumphant, even in his death, over the machinery of an insane society. Although Forman has explicitly stated in interviews that his purpose was the same as Kesey's, that intention is not manifest in the film: the metaphor no longer operates successfully because of the very transformations that were made in the interest of realism and sophistication. This is most troublesome because those moviegoers who have not read the novel—who are not aware of how both McMurphy and Nurse Ratched differ from the characters in the novel, or of how the male/female and individual/institution conflicts have been virtually eliminated—are still likely to see the

movie as Forman does, as a paean to the free spirit who triumphs through non-conformity. But it is no such thing.

We are so used to sentimentalizing the individual who "bucks the system" that we often shut our eyes to the possibility that the "system" just might have some justification. The problem with the movie is that it simply isn't obvious—as it is in the book, with its cardboard characters—that Nicholson's McMurphy is any more virtuous or any more sane than anyone else—including Nurse Ratched. This might be the price to be paid for trying to make a "realistic" movie out of a novel that can only be regarded as fantasy.

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is a novel of the '60s—perhaps the novel of that decade. The movie version is simply ten years too late—too late to render the novel adequately in the fashion of that decade, and too sophisticated to capture its clearcut, if simpleminded, purpose. As a novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* succeeds in spite of—or perhaps because of—its limitations. As a movie, it fails, in spite of the excellence of its performances and production. □

Book Review/Dale Vree

## Counterattack of the Radicals

Beginning in the middle-to-late 1960s the liberal intellectual community split into radical-liberal and moderate-liberal camps, with the radicals pitching tents in such publications as the *New York Review of Books*, the *Nation*, and *Dissent*, and the moderates (led by Irving Kristol) pitching theirs in *Commentary*, the *Public Interest*, the *New Leader* (and occasionally in the pages of *The Alternative*). If Charles Kadushin's study of elite intellectuals is a reliable guide, the radicals won a significantly larger number of prestigious intellectuals to their side than did the moderates (see *The American Intellectual Elite* [Little, Brown, 1974], pp. 30-31). This is perhaps one reason why the moderates have focused so much of their firepower, not only on the *ideas* of the radicals, but on the "intellectual class" as such. In the collection of essays under review here (most of which originally appeared in *Dissent*), the radicals return fire—and, with a linguistic sleight of hand, burden their moderate opponents with the pejorative label, "new conservatives." Regrettably, the counter-attack is haphazard; both the quality and relevance of the essays are uneven. Perhaps this is partly inevitable since the "new conservatism" is not a systematic political philosophy, but rather a *mood* of a heterogeneous group of individuals. According to Lewis A. Coser, that mood is broadly Burkean-cum-Niebuhrian in that the new conservatives place great stress upon the "recalcitrance of social realities and sinful men"

to the efforts of social engineers (p. 6).

Unlike many of the *old* conservatives, the *new* conservatives cannot easily be ignored by mainstream intellectuals, for they simply cannot be dismissed as plutocratic lapdogs and would-be aristocrats out to roll back social democracy and the income tax. The new conservatism, in Joseph Epstein's words, "speaks neither in the gruff voice of established privilege nor in the hollow one of aristocratic pretension."

### *The New Conservatives: A Critique from the Left*

edited by Lewis A. Coser  
and Irving Howe  
Quadrangle \$9.95

No... it appears to be a conservatism arrived at upon disinterested grounds—a conservatism more purely intellectual, and hence more formidable, than any in recent decades" (p. 9). Furthermore, many of the new conservatives are former leftists who (unlike many of the old conservatives who once were Marxists) have not entirely disowned their past. Norman Podhoretz, the editor of *Commentary*, is one example. As Epstein points out, his hostility to "quotas, the mentality behind the zero population growth movement, the New Left, the New Politics, and that group of moneyed, morally smug, and

well-schooled Americans David Bazelon once described as the New Class" is not contrary to his background as a democratic radical" (p. 14). Although Epstein does not elaborate, it would be well to point out to orthodox leftists that much of the hostility of the new conservatives to the current Left is rooted in a radical, social democratic distaste for irresponsible elites of all kinds—particularly, at this point in American history, the ascendant elite of New Class intellectuals and professional people—or, more simply, the "verbalists." Likewise, orthodox rightists should be warned that the new conservatives may not be willing to make common cause with them simply for the sake of returning this country to the money-worn clutch of the entrepreneurial class.

Whereas the opening contributions by Coser and Epstein discuss the new conservative phenomenon in general, the essays that follow—some of which I shall discuss—focus on particular aspects of the phenomenon.

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Michael Harrington offers a sharp critique of the "limits of social policy" school led by Nathan Glazer, Daniel P. Moynihan, and Daniel Bell. The failure of the Great Society programs, argues Harrington, was caused, not by a government that did too much, but by a government that did too little. Furthermore, says Har-