



THE TALKIES

POP'S DINER

by Martha Bayles

No doubt about it, diners are in. From the trendy Empire Diner in Manhattan to the photo-realist paintings of John Baeder, the roadside diner has gone the way of the Burma-Shave sign and the Superman comic: It has become transmuted into art. It is strange how we Americans tend to fixate on certain objects, like diners, which are too old to look new, but too gimmicky-commercial to look old. Some say that this is the essence of pop art: that when a Campbell's Soup can is placed in an art gallery the familiarity wears off, and we can appreciate its purely visual qualities. When the same kind of transmutation is effected by both a change of context and the passage of time, the best phrase for it is pop nostalgia.

Barry Levinson's hit movie *Diner*, about five young men coming of age in Baltimore in 1959, applies pop nostalgia to the details of the era's material culture. For one thing, it alters our perception by using a modern palette, cool and blue, at the opposite end of the spectrum from the warm, garish colors found in films made during the fifties. From the dark red lipstick of the women to the streamlined stainless steel of the diner where the men spend their nights, the fifties look much more aesthetic with all the yellow filtered out. And the shapes of things, notably cars, are photographed from an unusual middle distance which accentuates every bulge of chrome and obliquity of tailfin.

It is important to recall that, with regard to objects, pop nostalgia does not really deride; it appreciates. *Diner* looks back with great sweetness and affection on rock 'n' roll, pink flamingos, and stores where you can't buy a TV set without a hi-fi built in. Unfortunately, however, we are living in an age where pop nostalgia is considered a valid way to look not only at objects, but at people. And when it does, it comes closer to the satirical side of pop art. Anyone who has read a review of this movie will

know that its theme is not merely objects. In the words of Pauline Kael: "*Diner* is a great period piece—a look at middle-class relations between the sexes just before the sexual revolution." Levinson couldn't say it any better himself, although he tries: "Today women have an awareness of themselves. Guys have the beginning of an awareness of women. But at that time there wasn't any awareness. There was no understanding at all."

When artist and critic agree, how can the audience fail to go along? In Boston, *Diner* is playing at the sort of theater that sells home-baked cookies and distributes copies of Kael's review to its patrons, so that by the time the lights go down, we are all prepared to sit back and watch the sexism. Right away a character named Boog, who sports a magnificent DA, places a bet with his diner buddies that the local ice maiden will touch his penis while watching a movie (which just happens to be A

Summer Place with Troy Donahue and Sandra Dee: a classic piece of late-fifties titillation). Amid smirks and guffaws, Boog accomplishes the task inside a popcorn box strategically placed on his lap—and everyone over thirteen in today's movie audience affirms that this is not an enlightened way to relate to a woman. Another character, Eddie, who is an avid football fan, makes his fiancée pass a test on the subject before allowing the wedding, where the bridesmaids wear the colors of the Baltimore Colts. Shrevie, who is already married, warns Eddie that when a couple can get unlimited sex, there's nothing left to talk about. A fourth character expresses concern that his girl will have to quit a job she enjoys to marry him—to which one of the buddies retorts, "Aw, why complicate the issue by dragging her into it?"

I must say that at first it seemed odd that these incidents are all supposed to be occurring within the same brief span of days, to young men all in their early twenties. Surely

the popcorn caper, and a fifth character selling his date for five dollars at a dance, belongs to a more pubescent stage of development than anxieties about marriage—or in the case of Boog, a certain gallantry based on sexual experience which he displays toward the end of the film. Then I realized that this is pop nostalgia at work, not just on the visual level, but on the narrative level. By throwing together every leer, fear, and adolescent prank he can think of, Levinson flattens his characters into a set of predictable attitudes: a cartoon version of a period in his life that, in other respects, he obviously wishes to render in depth.

This is the element of satire, and of course we should expect it from a man who (judging from his remarks) belongs to a whole generation of reconstructed male chauvinists, not to mention the women who worked so hard to reconstruct them. Stanley Kauffmann speaks for all such people when he deplores "the American male's hatred / fear of women," and solemnly reminds us that "clear signs of contemporary change in these attitudes are growing, but those attitudes in their earlier, pure state are the locus of *Diner*." Barry Levinson is certainly not the first filmmaker to look back on his youth and say, "Gee, how unenlightened we all were." He may, however, be the first to depict unenlightenment in this particular pop nostalgic way. And the fact that he does so may be the secret of his success. For I suspect that today's young audience enjoys *Diner* precisely because, along with the yellow, the solemnity has been filtered out.

My evidence for this is scanty—just an impression, from teaching college freshmen, that although they offer lip service to the values of the women's movement, the present student cohort is just a little bit sick of it all. I saw *Diner* in the aforementioned theater when it was full of college students, and couldn't help noticing how utterly delighted they all were by this outrage to their



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carefully nurtured antisexist sensibilities. Some laughed so hard they almost choked on their cookies. They were also watching a movie about their parents' generation, which no doubt added to their amusement. But that is another reason why the pop nostalgic approach is so effective: Like pop art, it gives the appearance of satire without being awfully clear about what, in fact, it is satirizing.

Diner presents an array of charming, basically sympathetic characters who engage in the forbidden pleasures of male bonding, sex jokes, and what Kauffmann calls "the deer-park mentality; women as the hunting preserve of men." The attitudes behind these pleasures are spoofed; but in a way, so is the idea that people who behave in such ways are so terrible. The guys in the diner are lovable, and even the girls surprise

us at the end when, at Eddie's wedding, the bouquet is thrown and they all reach up with delicate white-gloved hands: not to catch it, but to keep it airborne long enough to land on the table where our heroes are sitting. It's hard not to feel at this stage that the whole thing is a put-on—of everyone, including Pauline Kael and Stanley Kauffmann. It may be that Levinson has pulled an Andy Warhol without fully realizing it. For

the essence of pop art—and pop nostalgia—is not really satire, as many people think. Satire is quickly blunted by nostalgia and appreciation. Placing a soup can in an art gallery invites us to laugh at the soup can, but also at the art gallery. By trying to make fun of both, it doesn't say a whole lot about either. But if we know what's good for us, we won't point that out. We'll just stand there and smile. □



AMERICA'S ROYALIST UNDERGROUND

by T. John Jamieson

The principal feast of the American civil religion is upon us. True patriots will roast hot dogs and risk dismemberment from the use of firecrackers; even cynical leftists who, during Vietnam, refused to stand for the national anthem at high school assemblies will play Frisbee and light up a joint. Local demagogues will invoke the ghosts of Washington and Jefferson and modestly concede that, in their case at least, "democracy works." A few men and women of intellect and imagination, though inwardly dissenting, will outwardly conform to custom in order not to give offense to relatives, or else they will cultivate their gardens alone. These are Tories, adherents of the politics of throne and altar, feeling no less American and no less patriots for knowing what the civil war of 1775-81 was really about. For them, July is the cruelest month: After Independence Day comes Bastille Day, and then the anniversary of the Czar's murder, to say nothing of the July monarchy.

In their frustration with the current constitutional arrangement, which most of them regard as a necessary evil, these American royalists have created an international historical cult which embraces all forms of the lost cause of legitimism and which champions every dynasty. Some have reconciled themselves to the Whig constitution of 1787, but give free rein to their fantasy outside the national border. Among these are Russell Kirk and Frederick Wilhelm-

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sen. Kirk, who has characterized himself as a Bohemian Tory, advocates the politics of prescription, and, like his mentor T.S. Eliot, believes that nations which have a king should continue to have one. Wilhelmson, the great Thomist of the University of Dallas, actively involved himself in the movement for the Spanish restoration—except that his candidate was not Juan Carlos, but Francisco Javier of Bourbon-Parma, the Carlist claimant; for his pains, the American professor was dubbed by the old pretender in 1975 a Knight of the Grand Cross of the Proscribed Legitimacy. Dr. Sir Frederick Wilhelmson continues to lead Carlists, both in Spain and Latin America, whose political aims have not yet been reached.

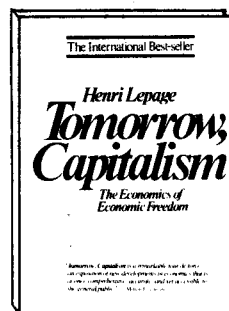
Most American royalists are Anglophile Jacobites; some, with varying degrees of seriousness, advocate an American throne and would unwrite 1776 altogether. They live vicariously through the study of British and Canadian politics. Mr. Daniel MacGregor of Chicago is the American correspondent of *Monarchy Canada*, the well-produced magazine of the Monarchist League of Canada. Mr. Jay Stribling of El Paso helped found while in college a Society of St. Charles the Martyr which publicly deplored the regicide as the foundation of twentieth-century totalitarianism and issued buttons bearing the legend, "RESTORE THE MONARCHY." Anglican Catholics, those Non-Jurors of the present, who refuse to swear by the do-it-yourself liturgy and the bisexual priesthood of modern Episcopalianism, have a habit of naming their parishes after

such royal saints as Charles and Edward the Confessor and Margaret of Scotland. Somewhere along the way they seem to have heard that James I once said, "No bishops, no king." Since there are bishops (and the Anglican Catholics breed them prodigiously), they infer, there must be a king somewhere. And there used to be a Reverend Wiebe in San Francisco, allegedly Episcopalian, who established a Monarchist League of America whose manifesto advocated the installation of a king in

America by A.D. 2000, preferably a cadet of the House of Windsor. Gordon Haff of the *Dartmouth Review* recently came out of the regalia closet; and elder literary statesman Austin Warren would like to be ruled by a native dynasty either of Jameses or Adamses.

I once knew a protégé of Russell Kirk, a fellow American, who while studying at St. Andrew's University in Scotland became head of the local

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