

emergence of a small group of scholars, journalists and military specialists who have started to look afresh at the war. . . . For most of these scholars, their re-examination is not to prove whether Vietnam was or was not a 'noble cause,' in President Reagan's phrase, but to find out what really happened and why. In the process, they are challenging some of the most cherished beliefs of both the right and the left."

He listed more leftist beliefs than rightist ones that are now being dis-

credited by the "new findings" of the scholars. For example, "as opposed to the public caricature of him as a warmonger, Lyndon Johnson was actually reluctant to become more deeply involved in Vietnam," Butterfield noted. And, "under the restrictions imposed by the Presidents, some American generals knew almost from the start that they could not win the war."

And, "while successive administrations did not understand that the Communists' appeal had its roots in

centuries of Vietnamese xenophobia, many antiwar critics—like Frances FitzGerald in her best-selling *Fire in the Lake*—over-glamorized the Vietcong, the Southern insurgents, and underestimated the role that North Vietnam played in leading the war in the South." And, "the 1968 Tet offensive was a disastrous military defeat for the Communists, as Gen. William C. Westmoreland claimed . . ."

Finally, "after Tet—though most Americans at home had given up on

the war—the cumulative weight of American firepower and spending in Vietnam dramatically undercut support for the Communists. As a result, the United States was probably in a stronger position in Vietnam in 1972, just before the Paris peace accords, than at any previous point in the war." Read those two sentences again and you may conclude that some scholars are close to saying, roughly, that the United States had just about won the war, at which point it pulled out and lost. □



THE TALKIES

STREEP TEASE

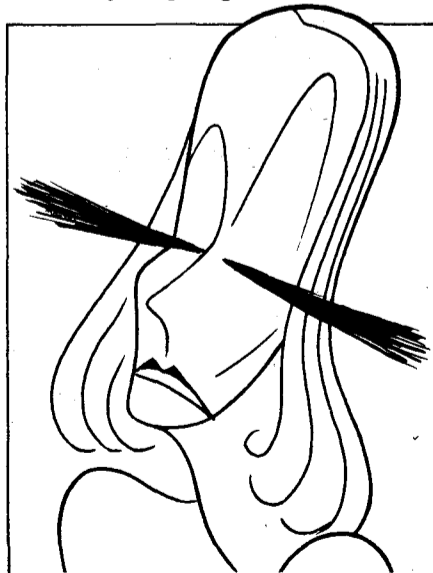
by Martha Bayles

It is a tender scene. Sophie, the beautiful Polish Catholic survivor of Auschwitz, is sitting up in bed while Nathan, her handsome American Jewish lover, leafs through one of her books. He reads no Polish, but when she identifies the book as a translation, he enthusiastically recites the opening passage in the original English. She responds in Polish, they smile at each other, and the camera pans backward through the rain-glazed window of their Brooklyn rooming house.

What book is this, which means so much to the war-ravaged heroine and Holocaust-obsessed hero of the film *Sophie's Choice*? The literate filmmaker may think of several possibilities, but I doubt whether *Look Homeward, Angel* by Thomas Wolfe will be high on the list. Of course it's possible that in 1946 such characters would be going into ecstasies over Wolfe's extravagantly dissipated prose. But possibility is not verisimilitude. I think the real reason Wolfe gets a plug in this scene is because he is William Styron's favorite author, and the filmmakers wanted to indulge Styron—who, after all, wrote the best-selling novel *Sophie's Choice*.

Certainly Styron indulges himself. He is the sort of writer who takes on the heaviest themes, only to outweigh them with his own self-dramatization. The story of Sophie's experiences at Auschwitz, and of the

progressive mental deterioration of Nathan, who tries to help her but ends up inducing her to commit suicide with him, are narrated by Stingo, a young Southerner who lives downstairs in their rooming house and bears a strong resemblance to William Styron. There is nothing wrong with relating events from the point of view of a detached observer—sometimes, when the events are particularly grim, this provides a needed distance. But Stingo is no Marlow, speaking in hushed, appalled tones about the heart of darkness. On the contrary, the enormity of Auschwitz seems to bring out his garrulous side. On and on he rattles about Sophie's great suffering, his own guilt and identity as a white Southerner, his burgeoning literary talent as he struggles to write his first novel, and his elaborately disastrous attempts to score with a succession of neurotic young virgins.



Few novelists have attempted to encompass such extremes within a single work; the problem of transitions is too great. Only time, and a certain kind of silence, can begin to suggest the movement from hellish suffering to normality; and these are elements which Styron most emphatically does not know how to use. He just rolls it all together into the same ball of soft, waxy verbiage. For example, Sophie reveals her past to Stingo not once but several times, in increasing detail. I suppose this is Styron's way of building up suspense, but it diminishes our respect for Sophie by making her look like a broad who enjoys getting drunk and talking about Auschwitz. And Stingo keeps bringing us back to Brooklyn with sentences like this: "Sitting there in the wan light, both Sophie and I had, I think, a feeling that our nerve endings had been pulled out nearly to the snapping point by the slow accumulation of too much that was virtually unbearable."

Needless to say, this sentence is well past the snapping point. Slack are the sentences, and slack is the overall organization of this novel. It contains so many ill-executed shifts back and forth between competing time frames, that when we learn the final truth about Sophie's Auschwitz experience, it seems more like an afterthought than a revelation. Her ruling passion, while imprisoned there, is supposed to have been her concern for her young son. But the novel does not even refer to the boy's existence until after a lengthy account of Sophie's attempted seduc-

tion of the SS camp commandant, Rudolf Hoess. And as for the "choice" of the title, we learn about that even later, when Sophie finally tells Stingo that upon arriving at Auschwitz she was forced to choose one of her children or allow them both to be gassed.

Yes, that's right. There was another child, a daughter, added four-fifths of the way through the novel, just in time for her own demise. Styron provides a rationale for withholding such crucial facts: Sophie is so traumatized by guilt she has repressed the memory, Stingo is penetrating ever further into horror, and so forth. But the effect of this timing, in such a loosely constructed novel, is to reduce the children to a couple of expedient stage props, tossed in to provide Sophie with a motive nobler than saving her own skin.

Those who have read Styron's other best-seller, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, in which the rebel slave is portrayed as motivated by a secret passion for his white mistress, may detect a similar theme in *Sophie's Choice*—namely, the psychology of victims who become sexually involved with their oppressors. Styron never comes right out and says that Sophie is attracted to Nazis, but the bulk of her story points in that direction: from her rejection by a domineering, Nazi-sympathizing father to her erotic nightmares at the camp. Before telling us *why* she plans to offer herself to Hoess, Styron regales us with her stunning blonde beauty

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and flawless German, which cause her to be selected Hoess's secretary. And we are given excerpts from the real Hoess's diary, indicating how he functioned as a normal man even while presiding over mass murder.

This excursus on Hoess is cloaked in philosophizing about the banality of evil, with quotations from George Steiner and Hannah Arendt. But its narrative effect is less to explore this question than simply to set up Hoess as a figure susceptible to Sophie's charm. This is reinforced by the clinical detail in which Styron tells us how every other Nazi, male and female, just can't help coming on to Sophie. I'm inclined to think that Styron's original intention was to carry through with the affair, then show Sophie's subsequent torment as she realizes she halfway desired it. But perhaps recalling the attacks of black writers on his white-obsessed Nat Turner, Styron chickened out, adding in a lot of material about Polish freedom fighters, Sophie's youthful concern for Jews, and (don't forget) her beloved children. The result is a profound irresolution at the core of the novel: a beclouding of the real reason for Sophie's guilt. And even worse, all this extraneous matter leads us to equate Sophie's particular guilt, in its masochistic sexual aspect, with the guilt of other concentration-camp survivors. Leave it to Styron to reduce all human extremity to a variation on sexual frustration.

The filmmakers may have indulged Styron's taste in literature, but in terms of these other excesses, director Alan Pakula does Styron a favor by relentlessly cutting and discarding. He also rearranges what is left—bringing the children in sooner, for instance—so that the film has a clean, economical structure quite unlike the segmented, overweight one of the novel. Some reviewers have complained that the film diminishes the characters of Nathan and Stingo—which it does, to very good effect. Who wouldn't prefer the film's balletic Nathan (played by Kevin Kline) to the novel's pretentiously, endlessly babbling genius-turned-psychopath? As for Stingo, Peter MacNicol plays him with a composure and dignity utterly lacking in Styron's version of his priapistic youth.

But with all these changes, what remains? As Pakula put it: "the essence was Sophie." And Sophie it is. Cut Meryl Streep's performance from this film, and you wouldn't have enough footage left over for a Coke

commercial. Which is interesting, because Pakula did not want to hire Streep at first, and had to be talked into it by the Polish director Andrzej Wajda, who had worked with Streep at the Yale Drama School, and felt she could handle the part.

And she might have, under different circumstances. She certainly did her homework, earning nothing but praise for her accents and pronunciations. Some critics, however, have described her performance as too perfect, too mannered. To the extent that this is true, the initial blame goes less to Streep than to those around her: the filmmakers who, instead of *using* her lavishly wrought performance, decided to *worship* it instead. The camera never stops adoring her face, even while trying half-heartedly, through muted color, to render the bleakness of Auschwitz. Instead of shaving her bald as a prisoner, the hairdresser gives her a spiky, New Wave style that wouldn't look out of place in the pages of *Vogue*. And when she is working for Hoess, her pallor is as cool and immaculate as the models' in the Lancôme ads.

In the end, all this homage takes its toll. Streep is a talented actress, but surrounded by indulgence instead of direction, she succumbs to her vanity. Except for a couple of scenes when she is first in New York, Sophie never looks ugly. And it's more than a matter of makeup and hair—even in the camp, she never drops the mannerisms (so myriad and subtle,

so at home on the silver screen) of the beautiful actress. Instead of looking blank or numb or corpse-like, she is always brimming with intense cogitation, tender concern, moral outrage, or high tragedy. She feels it all so deeply, and weeps. How gracefully she weeps! Auschwitz never reduces her to a condition lower than crystalline tears.

So the film gets rid of Styron's self-

indulgence, only to replace it with Streep's. Instead of Wolfeian rhetoric and sexcapades, we are treated to the glamour industry making the most of this season's biggest attraction. The result is disturbing, rather as though an advertising agency had set about finding and filming the Auschwitz Girl. Hollywood ought to realize there are some subjects which cannot be viewed through a star filter. □

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THE INTELLECTUALOIDS

LEARNED PSYCHOTICS

by Thomas S. Szasz

Perhaps because he does not have enough self-confidence, the ordinary person is likely to assume that when he cannot understand what someone in authority is saying, it is because he is too stupid or too uneducated. Authorities have always known this and have always exploited it by awing and bullying the plebes with Greek or Latin, with technical jargon, or, if need be, with gibberish.

Since psychiatry is a pseudoscience, it is not surprising that psychiatrists are especially eager to be accepted as scientific experts. Since they obviously cannot bring this about by discovering the causes and cures of mental diseases which—tragically for psychiatrists no less than for patients—do not exist, they have to do it by producing great quantities of gibberish. That is indeed the most constant and most frequent thing psychiatrists do, in speech as well as in print. George Orwell was not, but he might as well have been, writing about psychiatrists when he observed that “the great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one’s real and one’s declared aims, one turns as if it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a scufflefish squirting out ink.”

Although this was the furthest thing from what they had in mind, some years ago a group of mental-health educators conducted an experiment that demonstrated rather impressively the validity of my foregoing contention. The experiment consisted of the investigators’ hiring a professional actor “who looked distinguished and sounded authoritative,” naming him Dr. Myron L. Fox, bestowing upon him the persona of “an authority on the application of mathematics to human behavior,” and coaching him to teach “charismatically and non-substantively on a topic about which he knew nothing.”

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“Dr. Fox” addressed a group of psychiatrists, psychologists, and social-work educators and his lecture was videotaped. The tape was then shown to another similar group and finally to a group of educators and administrators taking a graduate course in educational philosophy. In all there were 55 subjects tested. The result: “All respondents had significantly more favorable than unfavorable responses. . . . One even believed he [had] read Dr. Fox’s publications.” Among the specific responses quoted by the investigators were the following: “Excellent presentation . . . Good analysis of the subject . . . Knowledgeable.” That this was the idea of a group of mental health experts about how to fake a psychiatric presentation is itself wonderfully revealing. But the best part of this experiment is, of course, that “Dr. Fox” was such a success.

“Dr. Fox’s” deliberately staged gibberish was delivered in 1972. In 1982, I discovered another “Dr. Fox-lecture,” this time given for real by a really distinguished psychiatrist before a really distinguished au-

dience. Since this address was published, I may quote from it, and I shall:

Recall that clinical experience and science do incrementally define the *selective* use of innovations, while policy reflexly greets innovation with prophecies of fiscal doom. In retrospect, the actual gains for health might render such poor prophets a loss! Where policy seeks formulas for determining choice and guiding treatment, science understands the fundamental basis for variability in disease and response and the method for sequentially approximating precision in the clinical process.

The author of this luminous passage, Daniel X. Freedman, is chairman of the department of psychiatry at the University of Chicago. The lines quoted are from his presidential address delivered at the American Psychiatric Association’s annual meeting in May 1982.

When a prominent American psychiatrist writes such gibberish; when that psychiatrist occupies an endowed chair at one of America’s great universities and is the president of the American Psychiatric Association; when the gibberish is the published text of his presidential address delivered before the Ameri-

can Psychiatric Association; and when the *American Journal of Psychiatry* publishes said gibberish as if it were in English and made sense—then we face a situation about which somebody ought to say something. Since no “uncontroversial psychiatrist” would dare to say that a psychiatric emperor is naked, especially when the emperor insists he is sporting the most splendid garments, I volunteer my services as a “controversial psychiatrist” (which is the least offensive diagnosis my colleagues like to pin on me) to bring this piece of psychiatric skullduggery to the attention of the public.

Freedman begins his address with these words: “I will not reprise [sic] this past active APA year, but wherever we have worked, members of APA have engaged in lively discussion and useful action on critical topics.” Presumably, Freedman means that he will not review or repeat whatever it is that he is referring to.

Freedman evidently believes that “reprise” is a very serviceable word, because he uses it again, toward the middle of his address, where he writes: “The remarkable advent of pharmacotherapies has of course profoundly affected both basic science and clinical practice, and—more than I can here reprise [sic] it—complexly affected professional and public orientation to psychiatry.”

That is surely an odd way of saying that the currently fashionable use of drugs in psychiatry has profoundly affected both the profession and the public. But what is it that Freedman can’t “reprise” here? He says it is the “remarkable advent of pharmacotherapies.” But the introduction of certain drugs into psychiatry is simply a fact or occurrence. It need not be, and indeed cannot be, reviewed.

Ever since schizophrenia—the most dreaded and mysterious of so-called mental illnesses—was invented by the great Eugen Bleuler in 1911, it was supposedly charac-

