



Batting Around

by James Bowman

Let's start, this time, with the inevitable Movie of the Month. Tim Burton's *Batman Returns* is less impressive visually than the *Batman* of 1989, but it has interesting things to say on serious subjects, including that of sexual identity. At the end of the film Catwoman (Michelle Pfeiffer) says to Batman (Michael Keaton): "I'd love to come home and live with you in your castle"—pause—"It's just that I couldn't live with myself." She then proceeds to execute the evil Max Shreck (Christopher Walken) with an electric kiss that is meant to seem both a condign punishment for his sexism and an allusion to the recognition line between Batman and Catwoman: "Mistletoe is deadly if you eat it; a kiss can be even deadlier if you mean it."

Of course, Catwoman has nine lives—we really are into mythic archetypes here—so the kiss does not kill *her*, and the deadliness she fears in a meaningful kiss is not electricity but love and consequent loss of identity. Having emerged out of the mousy little secretary, Selina Kyle, Catwoman is not about to become a mere "appendage" (as her psychobabbling ex-boyfriend puts it) of someone else. Not even Batman. The traditional-feminine appears to her as only another grotesque disguise that she put off when she chose to put on her cat suit, trashed all the girlish stuff in her apartment, and went looking for revenge against men.

Yet Tim Burton is not giving us the Hollywood party line on women's toughness and independence. Catwoman's feline fanaticism is tinged with ambiguity, which is why she is afraid of a kiss from Batman. At one point she says: "He makes me feel the way I hope I really am." But then she quickly retreats from

this flirtation with an identity that is not self-determined and depends on being loved by a man. Her vulnerability appears again when she and Bruce Wayne appear at a fancy dress party where they are the only people not in disguise. "I'm tired of wearing masks," she says as the sexual chemistry begins to cook.

But the mask cannot be removed. Batman's come-on line to her at the end—"We're just the same: split down the middle"—is true, but also the reason why they can't get together. Neither the Catwoman nor the would-be Batwoman can be merged into a single identity. There is just the hint of tragedy about this, just the suggestion that the new feminist world splits all women down the middle. Even Max Shreck, who is by no means a mere one-dimensional villain, is allowed to voice a not altogether villainous doubt about the moral "disease" abroad which "changes happy homemakers into catwomen."

I don't think that it is mere fancy on my part to see this as a sign of Hollywood's new and not very robust longings for more traditional, "family" values. In *Batman Returns*, both Batman and the Penguin (Danny DeVito) are orphans, lonely figures who share in the pathos of not belonging. When DeVito tries to "re-emerge" from the sewers where his parents dumped him at birth, he is rebuffed and retreats to the makeshift family of "my beloved penguins." By contrast, Max Shreck's devotion to his son, to save whom he volunteers to be submerged in sewage up to the eyeballs, is as rare here as his fabulous wealth. Love, marriage, and families in the film seem to be regarded with a nostalgic longing usually reserved for the unattainable.

There was no such wistful ambiguity about last summer's big hit, *Thelma and Louise*, which, like Catwoman, embod-

ied a feminist revenge fantasy while insisting that girls, too, could be the heroes of a picaresque adventure. But once such Tough Women have cleansed their cinematic world of annoyances, they may begin to wonder what is the point of being women at all. Given the constraints of the feminist consensus, which will not allow women to be depicted as docile homebodies except in a negative context, *Batman Returns* sets a pattern for bringing back a form of traditional femininity that other films are able to some extent to follow. The trick is to set the film in a world other than this one, or in the past, or else to try for subtlety and a tragic mood by hinting at possibilities that remain more or less unfulfilled.

There is nothing subtle about Ralph Bakshi's *Cool World*. It combines an exotic setting—the cartoon world pioneered by *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*—and a partial time-transplant, since it begins in the 1940s and in style owes a lot to the *film noir* of the period. The cartoon character Holli Would (played by Kim Basinger when she comes alive) displays a grotesque femininity that resembles a Hugh Hefner fantasy of the 1950s and shows why feminism grew up in the following decade. The phallic imagery of "the spike of power," by which the cartoon characters are able to translate themselves into such reality as the film is able to pretend to be in touch with, must have got past the feminist censors only as part of such obvious fantasy. The cartoons cling to unreality because in cartoonland none of life's disasters or losses is permanent, but the same fantasy world seems an appropriate resting place for such an old-time sex kitten as Holli Would.

Although its sexual imagery is repellent, *Cool World* at least offers a version of the feminine that is not a mere replica-

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tion of the masculine, and this seems to be a particularly difficult thing for Hollywood to do at the moment. Another stab at it comes in *A Stranger Among Us*, in which Melanie Griffith plays a tough-as-nails New York cop who goes undercover among some Hasidic Jews. The preposterousness of the film's premise is almost equal to that of *Shining Through*, in which Miss Griffith played a tough-as-nails spy. I think the attraction of mis-casting an obvious pussy-cat like her in roles such as these is that the director doesn't have to work to show that she retains a feminine quality.

The downside is that no one can believe in her as the killer dame. But then, no one really believes in this new kind of karate-kicking, high-caliber-weapon-packing killer dame anyway. Putting into the role someone like Melanie Griffith instead of, say, Rene Russo, the killer dame of *Lethal Weapon 3*, and allowing her to display lots of skin is Hollywood's way of giving its audience a sly ironic wink. Or so I prefer to think. It could be just stupidity. Certainly there is not much else ironic about *A Stranger Among Us*.

It has all the usual feminist accoutrements, including a final scene in which the pacific man (Eric Thal) must kill the bad girl and then keel over in horror while Miss Griffith, whose criminal victims are popped off with the same insouciance that her buttons are, looks on in scorn. Yet the close-knit family life of the Hasidim is allowed to make its impression on her and she begins to doubt the wisdom of her way of life, with its casual sex and no commitments. She is even allowed to be impressed by Thal's sister's telling her that she wants to be a wife and mother because nothing could be more important.

Only a heavy-ethnic character can get away with saying something like that, of course, but the standard-issue Career Girl/Tough Woman played by Griffith is definitely affected by this family orientation. In the end she turns down a colleague's offer of two weeks in Aruba and says that she is waiting for her destined man.

It is a popular theme. In *Boomerang* and *Man Trouble* improbable matches are made and rogue men (Eddie Murphy in the former and Jack Nicholson in the latter) are tamed by the love of a good woman. Even in *Lethal Weapon 3* the beautiful and dangerous Ms. Russo is

clearly the woman destined for Mel Gibson. Monogamy is in, it seems.

The sugary *Prelude to a Kiss* tries to make us love it, too. A young bride (Meg Ryan) exchanges souls with an old man (Sydney Walker) on her wedding day, making it necessary for her bridegroom (Alec Baldwin) first to discover the fact and then to switch them back. Along the way she unlearns her callow certainty that "the world is a really terrible place" and decides to have kids after all. The whole thing is silly in the extreme, but its Cartesian soul/body dualism makes the point that it is really the soul that we love when we love. Merely physical accidents, either of youth and beauty or age and ugliness are just that—which would be a more uplifting notion if Ryan and Baldwin were not themselves very attractive actors who



end up together just as they would have done in any old-time Hollywood movie.

It is good they suggest that permanent relationships are better than temporary liaisons, but none of these films really comes to terms with the problem posed by marriage in a post-feminist world: that men and women are obstinately different. That is what Hollywood is terrified of saying. Melanie Griffith in *A Stranger Among Us* fights and shoots and does everything else like a man; the souls of the old man and the young girl in *Prelude to a Kiss* are completely interchangeable; Eddie Murphy in *Boomerang* learns his lesson in love from a sexually predatory female boss who treats him in the same way as he treated all the girls he slept with before.

Yet a look at male-female differences *does* come this month, and from a very surprising source. Penny Marshall's *A League of Their Own*

promised to be another self-congratulatory exercise in Hollywood feminism—read retrospectively into the 1940s. See? Girls can play baseball too, just like guys! There is a lot of the Tough Woman myth in the picture, together with a lot of schmaltzy feminism, as the girls get together forty years later to remind themselves of what heroines they were. But there is also a subtle and implicit recognition that there are reasons why the major leagues are all male.

All the way through, Tom Hanks, as the washed up player who manages the girls' team, keeps insisting that they're not ballplayers, they're girls, dammit, and telling them, for example, that "there's no crying in baseball." Predictably, Hanks comes out of his alcoholic stupor for long enough to recognize that the girls are ballplayers after all—except that even as this realization is dawning on him, the more perceptive in the audience are realizing that he was right all along: they're *not* ballplayers.

Geena Davis (she of *Thelma and Louise*) plays the catcher, whose natural ability so impresses Hanks that he is prepared to proclaim her a real ballplayer. But in the end she utters the ultimate heresy, the thing that all women believe but that all men know is untrue: "It's only a game." Moreover, she has a fierce rivalry with her sister, a pitcher (Lori Petty), who always feels upstaged by her. In the heat of battle on the diamond, Miss Davis shows no partiality to her sister, advising the manager that it's time to pull her out towards the end of a hard-fought game when she doesn't want to go. But when the sister is traded and the whole season comes down to Geena Davis's having to tag her out at home plate, she drops the ball deliberately.

Aha! Typical woman! The personal relationship with her sister, requiring that the latter should beat her for once in order to escape from her shadow, is more important than winning. Likewise, though she enjoys the game, there is never any doubt in her mind that it is time to go back to the farm and play the dutiful wife when her husband comes home from the war. Perhaps only a woman director could get away with saying this—and in the context of what is otherwise a feminist festival. Certainly it raises troubling questions that no one in politicized Hollywood is equipped to answer and few can bear to listen to. □

Evelyn Arthur St. John Waugh was famous for so many things—his drunkenness, his snobbery, his clown's wardrobe, *Brideshead Revisited*—that it is sometimes possible to forget that he was also a great prose writer, possibly the greatest England has produced this century. To most people, Waugh is much more than the sum of his books: he is a way of life, an attitude, a fashion statement, a style guide.

And has been for more than thirty years. In the summer of 1958 Waugh visited Ampleforth College, in north Yorkshire, where I was then a 15-year-old schoolboy. The word went round that the Great Man was down on the Penance Walk with one of the better-connected monks. We immediately abandoned the radio in the corner of St. Oswald's Common Room (tuned to the American Forces Network) to look out the window. There below us, unless I am imagining all this, was the diminutive Waugh, puce of face, terrible of eye, with an ear trumpet tilted aggressively towards the respectfully lowered head of his black-robed companion. Wow! It was as though the Big Bopper himself had just dropped in, as, in a way, he had. There was, to be sure, nothing of the long-necked goose about Waugh, but we knew he was a class act all the same. He made it intellectually and socially smart to be an RC.

Religion came into it, too, I suppose. We were triumphalists, and insufferably smug. There seemed no chance to us then that Waugh's world would ever yield to change. But as he himself saw, it *would* yield, was yielding; the liturgical vandals were already marching on Rome. Yet Waugh's own influence—as distinct from the influence of the things he loved (such as the Church) and the things he invented (such as country-house Catholicism)—grew stronger by the day; and it now extends far beyond

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EVELYN WAUGH: THE LATER YEARS 1939-1966

Martin Stannard

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Catholic circles. The snobberies and taboos of English society remain firmly rooted in the prejudices Waugh championed. For example, such was the fierceness of his hostility to Non-U (non-upper-class) words—among them “toilet,” “perspire,” “serviette”—that even today, as Jilly Cooper has observed, aspiring upper-class mothers would rather their children came home from school saying “f---” than “toilet.”

Waugh had a horror of genteelisms, perhaps because there was something genteel about his own background. He was brought up in Golders Green, a middle-class Jewish suburb in North London. He was ashamed of his father, a publisher, less ashamed of his mother, a relative of Lord Cockburn of Cockpen. He was a humbug, and at times grotesquely selfish and cruel. He neglected his wife. His son James said that life with him was “utter hell.” It was not all warts, though. Waugh was generous, especially to the Jesuits and Poor Clares and to pals down on their luck. He was widely loved. His daughter Meg doted on him and he on her, which was hard cheese on poor James.

Martin Stannard does not entirely approve of Waugh, but then neither does anyone in his right mind. That said, the second volume of his biography (the first, published in 1986, covered the years to 1939), is perhaps a little pious at times. Stannard is impatient with Waugh's politics and snobbery, but his book is all the better for being in some measure hostile: there has been far too much toadying to Waugh in

recent years, and Stannard, who teaches English at a provincial university, has upset what one might call the politically correct conservatives; the man has mocked the Master. His book is, however, just, and ultimately sympathetic. It is written with grace, wit, and authority, and covers what, to me, is Waugh's most interesting period: the years after the “People's War,” when, in spite of decline and de-

spair, he hurled energetic abuse at the “so-called twentieth century” and at (among others) Churchill, Stalin, Tito, and Eden. Sometimes the abuse was knockabout, as when it was delivered at the bar of White's; sometimes it was sublimely comic, as when it appeared in *The Sword of Honour* trilogy, Waugh's finest achievement after *A Handful of Dust*.

For Waugh, as for Guy Crouchback, World War II began as a crusade for civilization, a battle against Nazism and Nazism's ally, Communism; it ended with civilization retreating in the face of Communism and liberalism. After the Russians become our allies, Waugh did not rejoice at Allied victories; on the contrary, he viewed them with profound misgivings. He was, for example, almost indifferent to the outcome of the Battle of the Bulge. Whoever won, he felt, Europe was already lost.

He was right, of course, although it is unlikely that he would have had a better war if he had continued to believe in the cause. He was a recklessly brave soldier, but a useless officer. He was too much of an anarchist for the military life. Once, unable to control his boredom during a lecture, he asked whether it was true that “in the Romanian Army no one beneath the rank of Major is permitted to use lipstick.” He spent a week getting publicly drunk at White's and then wondered why he was not asked to lead men into battle. He blamed others for his own failures. He was bloody-minded to a fault. Rebuked by his CO for being drunk in the mess one evening, he replied that he “could not change the habits of a lifetime to suit a whim of his.”