



# It's a Man's World

by James Bowman

When Charles Keating (yes, that Charles Keating) of the Citizens for Decent Literature said back in the 1960s that "more than anyone of his time, Russ Meyer is responsible for the decay of moral values in America," he may have been right in a way that he could hardly have intended at the time. It's not that Meyer, the director of the all-time camp classic *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* and a host of mildly titillating B-movies, was a pornographer. To watch today the reissued version of his 1966 film, *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*—which John Waters, the director of *Hairspray* and *Pink Flamingos*, calls the greatest movie ever made—is to be reminded of the innocence of what people thought of as dirty pictures back in those days.

No, it is not the awesomely cantilevered but always covered Tura Satana, who plays the killer go-go girl in *Pussycat*, nor the hilarious *double entendres* with which the dialogue is shot through ("Have a soft drink," says a hunky guy to one of the dancers. "We don't like nothing soft," she purrs menacingly) that was so subversive. It was, rather, the killer cynicism of the postmodern sensibility to which Waters, like many others, has made his own contributions since. Like zebra mussels in the Great Lakes, the knowing postmodern sneer chokes off all other life in our spiritual ecosystems, reducing both the heroic and the romantic to a joke.

It would be nice to think, as one sometimes almost does, that the heroic, in particular, might make a comeback. It has taken a double hit—

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from feminism as well as postmodernism (the misogynist old man in *Faster, Pussycat!* who came to hate women when he was paralyzed trying to save one from an onrushing train says: "They let 'em vote, smoke and drive and put 'em in pants and what do you have next? A Democrat for president")—so it becomes almost a shock when, in *Major Payne*, a sympathetic marine officer is allowed to punish his recalcitrant ROTC cadets by putting them in women's dresses and marching them around the campus chanting: "Got to earn my right to be called a man." Wow! Whatever next?

Of course, the eponymous Major, played by Damon Wayans, is also a comic figure. He is assigned to the ROTC because regular soldiering jobs seem temporarily to have dried up. "There's got to be someone who needs some killing," he pleads to his commanding officer.

"I'm sorry," says the general. "There aren't anymore. We've killed them all."

But for all his exaggerated blood-thirstiness and gung-ho qualities, there is still a serious side to him of a sort that is now, perhaps, only allowable in a black man. The old-fashioned movie morality tale about military discipline's molding a bunch of misfits into a team gets a new life here and is not merely sent up, although the context is comic. And when the major tells his trendily squishy love interest (Karyn Parsons) that her kind of "nurturing" can too easily turn into "neutering" or that he is glad that the boys hate him because "it will draw them close together and make them a team," we've got to wonder how such lines got past the Hollywood thought police.

There is a similar kind of male bonding going on in *Bad Boys* by Michael Bay, where the ghetto game of mutual

insult called "the dozens" (the Elizabethans called it "flyting") is played by two cool young black stars, Martin Lawrence and Will Smith, as the bullets fly around them. Unfortunately, the dialogue written by Michael Barrie, Jim Mulholland, and Doug Richardson is more remarkable for volume than for wit or subtlety. It is an illustration, if one were needed, of what your mother always told you about filthy language's only being for those without brains enough to lend force to their words any other way. But it is also characteristic of men in all-male fighting groups, and these we are still allowed to see, I guess, if they have an ethnic angle.

It seems that even Scotsmen will do—so long as they lived nearly 300 years ago and are up against the kind of pure evil that Tchecky Karyo supplies as the villain of *Bad Boys*. In *Rob Roy*, directed by Michael Caton-Jones from the classic novel by Sir Walter Scott, it is John Hurt and Tim Roth who conspire to get the better of the noble Robert (Liam Neeson). And though the film has its flaws, I was impressed that the latter's manly virtues and his concern with honor are taken seriously and not, amazingly enough, mocked. This may be why boy critics like Jack Kroll and Roger Ebert liked the picture, while girl critics like Janet Maslin and Rita Kempley, both of whom just couldn't get over (or perhaps under?) those kilts, were bored or impatient with it.

Miss Maslin even complains that the plot (treachery, robbery, murder, rape, a manhunt, flight and pursuit, escape from certain death at least twice, revenge, swordfights to the death, that sort of thing) is "too ponderous and uninteresting" and the domestic byplay of the charismatic Neeson and his attractive

mate, played by Jessica Lange, is all that kept her going. Poor Walter Scott only tells one of the most exciting, action-filled stories in history and all he elicits from modern critics is a yawn and some vague praise of the stars. Miss Kempley is even more uncomprehending. She calls Rob "about as bright as one of his cows. He doesn't even recognize that his obsession with honor will lead to the destruction of his clan. . . . Like Charles Bronson, RR has no greater cause than vengeance. Not king, not God, not country. He just doesn't want to be dissed."

Silly old Rob Roy! Imagine fighting and killing people because you don't want to be dissed! Have you ever heard of such a thing? Well, yes, actually. It is only the history of world literature until a century or two ago, something that Miss Kempley apparently has little knowledge of and less interest in. And the story is still being played out on the streets where the term "dis" was invented.

Of course, masculine honor has always been pretty obscure to women—as it is in the film, indeed, to Jessica Lange's Mary. "Would you have me lie against my conscience to suit Montrose?" Rob asks her. And, like a woman, she replies: "No, to suit me and the boys." But, to her credit, she comes round in the end, for when Rob is downcast and ready to give up she tells him that honor is "the gift a man gives himself—that's what you told our boys. Would you have stolen from yourself that which makes you Robert MacGregor?" Wow again! We're not used to hearing that kind of thing at the movies.

That was not true back in 1969 when the Movie of the Month first came out. *The Wild Bunch* by Sam Peckinpah has now been reissued in a "director's cut" that restores about ten minutes of original footage, and it reminds us of what movies used to be like before the postmodern virus entered the system. The conventional wisdom about this film is that it was a kind of precursor of our contemporary style. As Hal Hinson of the *Washington Post* writes, "In place of the usual good-guys-vs.-bad-guys western conflict, Peckinpah created a universe in which there were no heroes . . . [and] violence had no moral logic or justification. Instead, it was arbitrary, irrational, amoral. No longer could the wagons be circled to

ward off the enemy; the enemy dressed like us, and looked like us. The enemy was us."

This is not true. Anyone who watches *The Wild Bunch* knows at once who the good guys and the bad guys are. And the bad guys are precisely the ones who have no sense of the moral differentiation to be made between one form of violence and another. What is confusing, perhaps, to those, like film critics, who are generally pretty pacific characters themselves, is that neither the good guys nor the bad guys are fighting for any noble-sounding cause. They don't realize how rare it is that anyone does fight for noble-sounding causes. That men who risk their lives in battle almost invariably do it for the reasons that Peckinpah's *Wild Bunch* do it: out of a sense of solidarity with their comrades in arms.

Mark Helprin, the novelist, tells of how he came to regret his opposition to



the Vietnam war when a British sailor listened to his fine sounding moral objections to serving and then said simply, "But they're your mates." That is a reasoning that the *Wild Bunch*—like most brave fighting men—would have understood perfectly. It is in effect what Pike (William Holden) says to his men in explanation for what they do: "When you side with a man you stay with him, and if you can't do that you're like some animal. You're finished. We're finished. All of us. . . . We started together, and we'll end together."

Rarely has there been a more succinct summing up of the moral logic of conflict, and of honor, but to modern critics that looks like "no moral logic"—or one that is so bleak and depressing that it might as well be none. Even a sympathetic critic like Roger Ebert, who under-

stands that there is a "code" that motivates Pike and his gang, calls it a "set of sad, empty values" represented, to be sure, "with real poetry." Sad yes, but not empty. "The undercurrent of the action in '*The Wild Bunch*,'" he writes, "is the sheer meaninglessness of it all." To the outsider, death in battles that he does not share with the protagonists may look meaningless, but to Peckinpah it is shot through with the glory of a particularly pure (and, to most people today, repellent) form of masculine honor—however appalling its consequences may be both for the men themselves and a host of innocent bystanders.

There are, it is true, too many instances of a corresponding form of masculine sentimentality—having to do with male bonding through whoring and drinking and laughing loudly together at things that are not really very funny—and a further overlay of sentimentality about the ending of a way of life as the modern world comes to the Old West. "We gotta start thinking beyond our guns," says Pike meditatively as he reflects on the increasing difficulty of robbing railroads in 1913. "Those days are closing fast." These are the real flaws of the film, or rather the directed nature of the narrative in order to stress them. But the male bonding itself is simply the subject, and it is not to be scorned.

The final sequence is one of the greatest-ever cinematic renderings of this subject. It begins in a whorehouse in a post-coital melancholy exacerbated by feelings of guilt and shame that their comrade, Angel (Jaime Sanchez), has been given up to the barbaric vengeance of the vicious Mapache (Emilio Fernandez). Pike straps on his gun, without a word, and looks in on the Gorch brothers, Lyle and Tector (Warren Oates and Ben Johnson) in the next room. "Let's go," he says simply. After a long pause during which the full meaning sinks in of what he is proposing—namely the three of them along with their companion, Dutch (Ernest Borgnine), taking on an entire guerrilla army in vengeance for Angel—Lyle answers: "Why not?" That's all the words needed between them, but it sums up what the code stands for. And it is the same code that we see in *Rob Roy* and in all the narratives of men in battle throughout the ages. The trouble is that it has now been so long since we had a proper war that nobody recognizes it anymore. □

Now in his early eighties, Eric Hobsbawm belongs to an age when humanist scholars thought in broad strokes. Like E.P. Thompson or A.J.P. Taylor, he is one of those great English historians who write to polemicize as well as instruct. It's a style that is not so much enlightening as invigorating, demanding not just patient attention but alert engagement—and Hobsbawm's history of the twentieth century is one of the last major books we'll receive from that grand tradition.

This quotation from *The Age of Extremes*—

[Nikita Khrushchev,] this admirable rough diamond, a believer in reform and peaceful coexistence, who incidentally emptied Stalin's concentration camps, dominated the international scene in the next few years. He was also perhaps the only peasant boy ever to rule a major state. However, détente had first to survive what looked like an unusually tense spell of confrontations between Khrushchev's taste for bluff and impulsive decisions and the gesture politics of John F. Kennedy (1960-63), the most overrated U.S. president of the century.

—gives the strengths and weaknesses of Hobsbawm's historical method in a nutshell: the playing of favorites (particularly those in the Communist Party, to which he belonged as a younger man), the delightful sports-trivia tidbit ("the only peasant boy . . ."), a tendency to push his points too far ("dominated the international scene"), and a sweeping bluntness that fans will call courage and detractors propaganda ("the most overrated U.S. president," "a believer in reform and peaceful coexistence"), along with a tendency to elide past inconvenient facts ("Khrushchev's taste for bluff"). All told, a writer blessed with such a gift for compressed argument and narrative momentum that his very tendentiousness is a delight, even at those moments when

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## THE AGE OF EXTREMES: A HISTORY OF THE WORLD, 1914-1991

Eric Hobsbawm

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reviewed by CHRISTOPHER CALDWELL

you want to pick up his books and hurl them against a wall.

That much will be familiar to readers of Hobsbawm's work on nineteenth-century topics, from industry to imperialism, which made his academic reputation. Less expected is Hobsbawm's sudden reappraisal of the nineteenth century as one of "moral progress," from which our own has fallen away. Hobsbawm sees the usual historian's distinction between socialist and capitalist camps as an artificial construct, and a barren one. More relevant, he thinks, is the clash between the Enlightenment (presumably meaning its belief in rationality, order, progress) and various new heresies thrown up in the last eighty years. Our century should be understood, Hobsbawm thinks, as one of religious wars, with "intolerance their chief characteristic." He divides it into three parts: the "Age of Catastrophe," which opens with Europe's enthusiastic self-immolation in World War I and ends with the dropping of the atomic bombs; the "Golden Age" of stability and prosperity that ran until 1973 or so; and the "Landslide" of the last two decades, in which Hobsbawm sees a collapse of old certitudes at precisely the worst time: as some of the most nettlesome problems of 1914 loom anew.

Hobsbawm blames the short peace that followed World War I on the Great Depression and the rise of two vying movements—communism and fascism—that eventually fed off it. Hobsbawm follows an argument, more often advanced by scholars of the right, that fascism was a progressive movement with certain similarities to communism. He

does not share the right's view that communism inspired fascism, but he does think it suggested fascism's tactics.

The fascists were "revolutionaries of counterrevolution," for theirs was a politics based on movement from below and non-traditional leadership principles. Had Hitler not turned the culture of international fascism anti-Semitic and expansionist, Hobsbawm thinks, Europe would likely have lived with

it, as it lived with Mussolini for nearly two decades until his alliance with Hitler. Here Hobsbawm sets up a way of looking at societies on the verge of authoritarian takeover that will ricochet throughout the book until its ominous final chapters.

With the West beleaguered by fascism, it was Communist Russia, Hobsbawm holds, that "proved to be the saviour of liberal capitalism." First, it won the war against Hitler. Second, it provided the necessary incentive for capitalism to reform itself away from "free market orthodoxy," for the Soviet Union was immune to the Great Depression, having gone from producing 5 percent of the world's goods and services in 1929 to 18 percent in 1938. Such statistics are not trustworthy, of course, and it would be difficult to draw a lesson from them even if they were. (Hobsbawm notes, for instance, that Nazi Germany eliminated unemployment during the period 1933-38: Are we to credit Hitler with saving Western capitalism?)

This does not mean that such statistics, widely trumpeted by Nazis and Communists alike, were not powerful as propaganda. In retrospect, the great triumph of the Roosevelt administration was to preserve a working democracy in the face of doctored statistics pouring out of the totalitarian utopias. Yet the New Deal went far enough towards authoritarianism: among the Western economies, the United States fared by far the worst in pulling itself out of the Depression. Whatever the New Deal's political successes, it was economically disastrous, plunging the United States into a second crash in 1937 at a time when Sweden and Japan, for instance, were doubling their economic out-