



Selling Our Souls

Hollywood is the one devil you can always resist.

Retellings, in one form or another, of the Faust legend may constitute a trend in Hollywood this autumn. We had an oblique treatment of it in *Playing God* where the hang-dog David Duchovny as a de-masked surgeon (he lost a patient on the operating table when he was high on drugs) gets a chance to practice medicine again at the invitation of a vicious gangster, played by Timothy Hutton. "It's the old story," he says in his lugubrious voiceover: "the choice to be a slave in heaven or a star in hell.... And hell does not always look like hell. On a good day, it can look a lot like L.A." The rest of the movie, written by Mark Haskell Smith and directed by Andy Wilson, trades on similar, not-quite-successful attempts at wit and profundity, but its real point is simply to be hip. Dr. Faust wears blue jeans, Mephistopheles has dyed blond hair, and Gretchen (Angelina Jolie) has the most amazing lips since Brigitte Bardot. It's the *ewige Weibe* with attitude.

Call me old-fashioned, but I want something more out of a movie than just the feeling that I have to be cool to appreciate it. *Devil's Advocate* offers us a more moralized Faust in the person of Keanu Reeves, a small-town lawyer in Florida who suddenly finds himself courted and offered a senior partnership in the devil's own law firm—which is naturally in Manhattan. The movie also gets the quote about reigning in hell versus serving in heaven closer to the way John Milton wrote it—which may be why it names its Mephistopheles,

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played by Al Pacino, after him. But although it presents us with a real moral conflict and makes the essential point that the devil's temptations are effectual unless we freely choose to yield to them, the film itself yields to a diabolical temptation to exaggerated, Grand Guignol effects. It allows Al Pacino his natural tendency to overact and it indulges itself in a lot of those computer-generated morphings that, however much they may cost, always look cheap to me.

Even the supposed moral counterweight to the devil, Judith Ivey in the role of Mr. Reeves's Bible-bashing mother, is made to look as camp and silly as religious people almost invariably are in the movies. The filmmakers themselves (Taylor Hackford, director, Jonathan Lemkin and Tony Gilroy, writers) don't take their material any more seriously than do Al D'Amato or Don King, both of whom put in good-natured cameos as close friends of the devil. Nor are we meant to take it seriously. Al Pacino might as well have been given a red suit with horns and a tail, so far is he, like the temptations he has to offer (megabucks, impossibly eager women, media stardom), removed from the ordinary experience of his audience.

Paul Thomas Anderson, the talented young *auteur* of *Boogie Nights*, at least understands this much. His Mephistopheles, played by a marvelously raffish Burt Reynolds, is much more like the real thing, offering Mark Wahlberg the chance to be a porn "star" without himself realizing—so complete is his moral blindness—that such stardom is anything but what his victim imagines it to be. It is not with the monarchy of hell offered to Keanu Reeves that the real devil wins us

over, but with much more paltry temptations—and he does so by means of our own self-delusion. The problem with *Boogie Nights* is that, like Mr. Reynolds's benevolent porn producer, Jack Horner ("What a good boy am I!"), Mr. Anderson shares many of his characters' delusions. To him, as to David Duchovny, hell on a good day looks a lot like L.A.—or at least the San Fernando Valley.

Thus the pathetically incompetent but rather sweet "Dirk Diggler" (Mr. Wahlberg) cheerfully embraces degradation, if not damnation, for the sake of forming a sad but oddly loving little family—the family he has never known—with Jack as the daddy, Dirk's co-star Amber Waves (Julianne Moore) as the mommy, and the equally stupid and waiflike "Rollergirl" (Heather Graham) as his sister. The funniest line in the picture is when, during a quarrel with Amber, Dirk shouts at her, "You're not my f---ing mother!" Of course, it is precisely his f---ing mother that she is. Anderson, unlike Milos Forman in *The People vs. Larry Flynt*, does not cheat by attempting to mask the sordidness of what these people do (though the need for an "R" rating is a considerable constraint on his representation of it), but at some level he does share their belief that it must all be worth it. That is a real failure of moral imagination.

By contrast, Ang Lee's moral imagination in *The Ice Storm* is powerful enough to overcome some serious disadvantages and genuinely to move us. Here—Connecticut, 1973—both God and Mephistopheles are absent. Perhaps, like poor Richard Nixon whose slow-motion fall everyone is watching on the TV, they are in the process of resigning their respective presidencies. But it is this absence which is the temptation, the sense at the height of the sexual revolution among these wife-swapping suburbanites and their troubled chil-

then that, if No One is watching, they might as well do as they like. In this so-promising state of freedom and moral collapse, we experience along with them a dawning realization of the truth so baldly and frighteningly stated by Marlowe's Mephistopheles—"Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it." strikes us like an electrical jolt.

Mr. Lee gets excellent performances out of Kevin Kline, Joan Allen and Sigourney Weaver in the principal roles, and the children—Christina Ricci, Elijah Wood, Tobey Maguire, Adam Hann-Byrd—are beyond praise. But the disadvantage referred to above is, in my view, the film's precise location in time. Like *Boogie Nights* it is set in the 1970's, but unlike *Boogie Nights* it milks its presentation of the decade for all it is worth. Yet the more we are invited to laugh at the clothes and the music and the hair and the other outdated fashions (just look at that waterbed!), the more we are let off the moral hook. The film loses some of its impact and immediacy as we are tempted to believe that we have got beyond not only those things but the state of moral and spiritual crisis which is their setting as well.

Maybe Ang Lee himself is a kind of Mephistopheles here! Certainly Mike Figgis in *One Night Stand* is. Fortunately, the temptation he is offering us—namely belief in that romantic love whose demands excuse every sort of appalling behavior to spouses and children—is so familiar from a thousand Hollywood movies that no one, unless he is already pretty far gone in self-deceit, is likely to fall for it. Interesting, then, that the film itself is so largely a study in self-deceit, as the two principals, played by Wesley Snipes and Nastassja Kinski, follow their first impulse to jump into bed together while continuing to treasure (with the director's connivance) the comforting illusion that they really did try to avoid it. The concatenation of circumstance which results in their yielding to temptation is almost as incredible as the plot twist at the end which sets the capstone on the adulterous lovers' unassailable self-esteem. Could it be that by so calling attention to the unavailability of that which induces in them only complacency, Figgis means to criticize, even ridicule that complacency?

Naw.

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Hollywood is too predictable in its moral obtuseness for that. That is one of the things that is so depressing about it. The other is that its diabolical denizens are in fact one's fellow countrymen. Well mostly. Figgis is English and Miss Kinski—who looks to me to have passed her sell-by date—is German, but they are de facto Americans.

Meanwhile, in a small country on the edge of Europe with a population about the size of Alabama's, they can produce real grown-up pictures like our Movie of the Month, Jan Troell's *Hamsun*. Unfortunately, the movie audience in this country being what it is, there is a very good chance that this film will never come anywhere near you, and you will be lucky to find it, a year hence, on video. But if you do have the chance, be sure not to miss it.

Coincidentally, it also has a Faustian element. The film tells the story of the Norwegian writer Knut Hamsun (Max von Sydow) who, having won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1920, became a Nazi sympathizer during the war and was tried after it for treason. Hitler (Ernst Jacobi), the Mephistopheles to his Faust, offers him that most subtle and ubiquitous temptation, flattery of his victim's self-importance. Small wonder that the film couldn't have been made in Hollywood! In one of the film's many memorable scenes, Hamsun, as empty-headed a celebrity as ever prattled of his political views to David Letterman, lectures Hitler himself on Norwegian national interests and thinks that he is listened to. It is typical of the man, who is a deeply unsympathetic character from beginning to end:

arrogant, insensitive, self-centered, pig-headed, cruel to those who love him and unforgivably naïve.

Yet without even the counterbalance of Hamsun's skill as a writer—so difficult to put across in a movie—Troell and von Sydow between them manage to make us feel more for him than we ever could, believe it or not, for Keanu Reeves. A lot of the credit, too, should go to Ghita Nørby, who plays Hamsun's long-suffering wife, Marie. What she brings to the picture is not the pathos of her treatment at her husband's hands so much as her sense of loyalty in spite of it. She is actually much more the Nazi than he is, since "The Cause" offers her a reason for existence apart from him. It is a declaration of independence which he cannot allow himself to recognize as such. Yet in the post-war world where the theme of loyalty and betrayal is on everyone's lips—where their friend, the Nazi puppet Quisling (Sverre Anker Ousdal), is shot and Marie is sent to prison and Hamsun himself is said to be merely senile—it is only through the trickery and deceit of the enlightened victors that Marie is made to betray her husband.

Loyalty like hers cannot but shed some of its moral luster on its object, and we are the more disposed to pity him when Hamsun's arrogance is taken to school in the movie's most searing scene. The psychiatrist's interview with Marie, in which she has finally been induced to tell the story, weeping, of Hamsun's appalling neglect of their children, is intercut with Hamsun himself watching newsreel footage of the German concentration camps—something which, never much of an anti-Semite, he just never bothered to notice before. "The children! The children!" he mutters as the tears roll down his cheeks. The terribly moving final scenes leave us with images of personal and domestic life's outlasting and triumphing over the political, which is also the diabolical. But what a fee in dead and damaged people the devil always manages to exact! ❧

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Should He Be Impeached?

The Impeachment of William Jefferson Clinton: A Political Docu-Drama

R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr.
and "Anonymous"
Regnery / 275 pages / \$24.95

REVIEWED BY
Robert H. Bork

When the effort of the Jeffersonians to remove Federalist judges from the bench culminated in the Senate's failure to convict Supreme Court Justice Samuel Chase, Thomas Jefferson called the impeachment procedure a "farce" and "not even a scare-crow." And so, for most of our history, it has remained.

Only two presidents have been seriously threatened with impeachment. The first, Andrew Johnson, escaped conviction in the Senate, and hence removal from office, by a single vote. The second, Richard Nixon, aborted the process by resigning. Nevertheless, that resignation was forced by the looming specter of impeachment: there was little doubt that Nixon lacked the votes in either the House or the Senate had he chosen to fight.

Now, we are invited for a third time to contemplate the removal of a president from office through the impeachment process. R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr. and "Anonymous" make the case—and a powerful case it is—in *The Impeachment of William Jefferson Clinton*. If Nixon deserved impeachment, Clinton certainly does. The scandals of the two Clintons continue unendingly, from Arkansas to Washington. A new instance of misbehavior in office seems to surface every week.

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Tyrrell and Anonymous present their case as a narrative of the ordeal that awaits Clinton: the House hearings and adoption of a bill of impeachment; trial on the bill's charges in the Senate; conclusions of previous investigations; newspaper articles and television news clips. The authors skillfully produce an aura of reality and immediacy, a vividness that can be produced only by the narrative form. The earlier materials are real while the later ones, carrying the story forward to its conclusion, are necessarily products of the authors' imagination. The real past materials and the imagined future ones blend seamlessly because the authors know firsthand the cadences of political partisanship, its sonorities and its bickerings.

Bill Clinton came to office promising the most ethical administration in our history and has instead given us the sleaziest. But sleaze is not the gravamen of the authors' case for impeachment. The real charge, as Tyrrell and Anonymous make clear, is abuse of power. Of that there is ample evidence—enough to make the Nixon administration seem merely, almost mildly, errant by comparison.

The story opens with a Committee of Six—three Democratic Senators and three Democratic Representatives—calling on the president, just as a committee of Republicans had called on President

Nixon, to inform him that hearings are imminent and inevitable on a proposed bill of impeachment. They didn't have the votes to block the process. Henry Hyde, a highly respected representative from Illinois, was to chair the hearings. Clinton responded with a television address on June 24, 1998, claiming he had been subjected to "an unprecedented and mean-spirited campaign of lies, half-truths and vilification" from the first day of his presidency. This attempt to overthrow the will of the people wasn't aimed at him self alone, he said, but was aimed at usurping the Constitution. The stage is set.

All of the scenery is not in place, however, because a major factor, the Report of Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr has not yet been submitted. The authors

