

Pyongyang, North Korea—I found that the bar in the ghastly Koryo Hotel was slowly taking on the aura of a hangout, with chancy businessmen and visiting hacks posing as tourists, and odd young men with the business cards of Chinese and other “news agencies.” It was encouraging to see the old mixture taking form as if in a familiar cocktail-shaker; it meant that things were beginning to happen. There’s nothing like encountering “information” in its raw and untreated state; one of the reasons I became a journalist was that I didn’t want to rely on the newspapers for disclosure. Unfettered and loose-tongued reporters, in their untamed habitat, make much better sources. (Actually this isn’t always true even when it is: In the Sheraton Wayfarer in Manchester, New Hampshire, in 1992 I got a sense of how the reporters were buckling to their editors in deciding that there was an exciting “New Democrat” named Bill Clinton and no need to look further. *Habemus candidatum*. Even so, one learned that the people signing this garbage didn’t always believe it.)

Hack behavior, however, need not be pack behavior. Perhaps the pressure to conform diminishes with distance from the home office. Or even, paradoxically, with proximity. In old Fleet Street a reporter with a spiked story could go across the road to El Vino and spread the word by other means; the whole subversive culture of *Private Eye*, which made secret-keeping and soft-censorship almost impossible, arose from this one wondrous fact. Nowadays, with newspapers relocated to the outer fringes of the city, and columnists e-mailing their stuff from home, London’s press lacks a heart and a heartbeat that it did, in living memory, possess. While in Washington, D.C., my home town, there has been nothing even remotely resembling a journo-bar since the old “Class Reunion” on H Street closed its doors in the early Reagan days. And all I can say, viewing the mainstream journalistic product of the city, is that it shows. ➤

Sneak Attack: Hollywood vs. History

BY JAMES BOWMAN

When I was a boy, my parents wouldn’t let me read comic books. Of course I sneaked them into the house and read

you get in comic books, especially when consumed as a steady diet, becomes just another form of fantasy.

These thoughts occurred to me as I watched the first of this summer’s block-

THE TALKIES

them at every opportunity, at least through a two- or three-year period of my youth when I might not have been so interested in them if they had not been forbidden. But when I asked why I wasn’t allowed to read them, I remember my mother replying that I would learn bad spelling habits from them. As it happens, I am quite a good speller, and most of the comics then were probably better proofread than books from university presses are nowadays. Her answer puzzled me then and it puzzles me now. I think she must have given it to buy time: because she didn’t really *know* why reading comic books was bad for me. I suspect that, to her, it would have been like having bad table manners or an unpressed shirt—that is, it was a sign of inferior social origins—and that she was afraid to admit to such snobbery.

Anyway, it got me to thinking, and in a way I have been thinking about this subject ever since. It just goes to show you that when you have a serious problem to get your mind around it can be a recreation and a pastime for life—as, generally, comic books are not. Now in middle age, I have come to the conclusion that there *are* reasons why reading comic books is bad for you. Long-time readers will know of my dislike of fantasy and belief that it is debilitating to the imagination, but in a way comic-book reality is even more harmful than comic-book fantasy. For the coloring and heightening of reality that



busters, Michael Bay’s *Pearl Harbor*, which uses computer animation seamlessly blended with live action to produce the same kind of heightened reality you find in a comic book. In theory there should be nothing wrong with this—at least I feel almost as much at a loss as my mother in trying to explain what is wrong with it. But it unquestionably contributes to the sense of excess that seems to me inseparable from the experience of this picture. There is too much of everything (beginning with too much money), and the views of the actual attack on Pearl Harbor are too perfect—perfect as they can only be when drawn, as in a comic.

It is an interesting question. If every visual image is scrupulously accurate, but no one at the time could actually have seen what we moviegoers see in this film, does that amount to falsification? At any rate, the experience of watching it too often produced in me a feeling of oppression at the cumulative unrealities rather than exhilaration at the sheer visual splendor of the thing. The story, too, is a comic-book tale of two handsome young fighter pilots (Ben Affleck and Josh Harnett), best friends since

childhood, who fall for the same pretty Navy nurse (Kate Beckinsale)—and it is already tending to crowd out the world-historical events that make up its backdrop when the director, Michael Bay, and his screenwriter, Randall Wallace, give the game away by abandoning the story of the Second World War at the point, sometime in 1942, when the right guy gets the girl. “The times tried our souls,” says the pretty nurse in voiceover, “and through the trials, we overcame.”

The “we” in context seems to mean “my boyfriend and I” and so is a reminder of the extent to which the movie’s—and the movies’—treatment of history tends to be only a means to treating ourselves. I sometimes think that even the idolatry of the Second World Warriors inspired by Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan* (which *Pearl Harbor* imitates in part) and Tom Brokaw’s *The Greatest Generation*—and now about to issue in a hideous memorial on the National Mall in Washington—is similarly tainted. Who could be against honoring the men and women who won the war? But the natural tendency of the times and their yuppie, therapeutic culture to honor the heroes as victims and “survivors” rather than “the glorious dead” suggests that we want a little of their glory for ourselves. After all, we’re survivors too!

History has always been to the movies more or less a quarry out of which pretty stones, agreeable to our own taste and the fashions of our time, can be removed at will, but there used to be about this process (as about so much else!) a sense of shame. *Some* effort was always made at least to pay lip-service to the otherness of the past. The comic book mentality does not bother—or, in the case of Baz Luhrmann’s *Moulin Rouge* or Brian Helgeland’s *Knight’s Tale*, it positively cultivates the illusion that the people of previous generations were just like us, right down to a fondness for Queen or Elton John. These movies vandalize the past as a way of paying tribute to the

present, since it flatters the stupid to be told that their ancestors were only trying with very imperfect success to be like them. Of course neither Mr. Luhrmann nor Mr. Helgeland really believes this, but nevertheless they enjoy the sense of liberation it gives them to say, as Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone* did in commending *A Knight’s Tale*, “purists be damned.”

By “purists,” of course, they mean those of us who believe it matters what the people who inhabited the earth before us were like—and that they were not like us. But with the supersession of academic history by theory and the pop cultural efforts of people like Messrs.

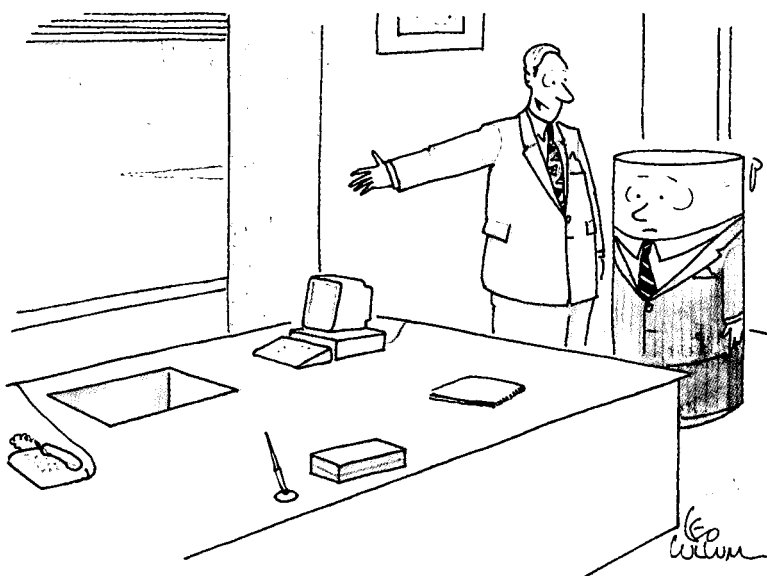
seen as unseemly and undisciplined then. Twice, at least, the celebration of a kill takes a man away from his weapon, which could have continued firing at the enemy.

Full marks to the producers for avoiding the use of the f-word, which would be common today but was not at all then. Unfortunately, the enemy are twice referred to as what sounds like “Jap suckers” (though it may have been another word)—which was not used in this sense then, and I suspect that a woman’s saying: “He did have a very cute butt...” even just among the girls would have been thought unladylike. “Could you *be* any more boring?” is

The comic book mentality positively cultivates the illusion that the people of previous generations were just like us, right down to a fondness for Queen or Elton John.

Luhrmann and Helgeland, this belief may itself soon be a historical relic. Who notices, for example, the way in which, on the few occasions in *Pearl Harbor* when our boys shoot down one of the attacking Japanese planes, they all cheer and dance about and pump their fists and do little end-zone celebrations of a kind that have become common in the last 20 or 30 years but that would have been

pure 1990s slang, as is: “But that’s just me,” while urging a bereaved person to “move on” or “get on with your life” after only a few weeks or months smacks of contemporary psychobabble. One has the sense that the filmmakers are at least trying to make their film look authentic—like the Merchant-Ivory team in the woefully inadequate *Golden Bowl* and unlike Luhrmann or Helgeland. But



“I trust you’ll find it suitable.”

presumably the example of Luhrmann and Helgeland means that they don't have to try very hard.

Here is how Baz Luhrmann, fresh from the triumph of *Moulin Rouge* at Cannes-Cannes, spoke to an interviewer about what he had been trying to accomplish:

"Now, through research, we know it's a fact: (1) Montmartre was Bangkok—a slum/sex industry." He clicks his fingers and pauses for the most fleeting of nano-seconds: "(2) Moulin Rouge was Studio 54. You know, a place where an entrepreneur invented something based on a dance-craze where the rich and powerful—Bianca Jagger, and Mick, and Elizabeth Taylor—could go down and mix with the young, the beautiful, and the penniless. And, as in Bangkok, people at the Moulin Rouge could pay money and have sex with them afterwards. It was a Disneyland of sexuality, a carnival of flesh for sale. Combination: Theatre, dance-club, brothel. Now, that's a fairly serious theme, but we want to deal with it in a disarming, fun way. So we're musicalising it. And the musical contract is: How do we understand that da-da da-da-da-da da-da [he sings the famous Offenbach can-can tune] was the most hard-core techno of the time? How do we show that this young kid, this poet, is like Bob Dylan?"

But of course Montmartre was *not* Bangkok, no matter how much sex was for sale there. Sex has been for sale in most places on earth through most of human history, but what makes Bangkok Bangkok today is not the same thing that made Montmartre Montmartre a hundred years ago. Obviously, too, the Moulin Rouge was not Studio 54, whatever may have been their superficial similarities. Without the celebrity culture of 1980s New York, Studio 54 would not have existed, and Paris in 1900 did not have New York's celebrity culture of the 1980s. Offenbach was *not* techno-music,

nor could anybody in 1900 have been Bob Dylan. Whatever you may think of Bob Dylan, and some people whose opinion I respect think him a serious poet, he is fundamentally and ineluctably different from the people who were serious poets in 1900.

But the movie was made just so as to make such facile comparisons, as if its purpose was simply to glory in the intellectual shoddiness of its concep-

Obviously the Moulin Rouge was not Studio 54, whatever their superficial similarities. Paris in 1900 did not have New York's celebrity culture of the 1980s.

tion. Among the other interviews I saw with Luhrmann, one suggested that the comic-book excesses of *Moulin Rouge* may have owed something to a reaction against the self-imposed austerities of the Danish Dogme 95 group. I haven't liked everything I've seen of the Dogme films, but the most recent to open in this country, *The King is Alive* by Kristian Levring, makes a good Movie of the Month because it shows how a historical text—in this case Shakespeare's *King Lear*—can be

brought into the present without doing violence to the past.

The story of a party of tourists stranded in an African desert who pass the time by having rehearsals for a performance of *King Lear* sounds unpromising, but Levring is able to do impressive things with it, and even add a dimension of meaning to Shakespeare himself when we see people who otherwise would have had no time for him find-

ing in his words the perfect expression for states of mind and feeling that they also would not otherwise have had time for. What Levring realizes that none of the other filmmakers do is that the points of connection between us and those who have lived before us come not out of the pretense that they were like us but out of those rather scary moments of recognition and self-knowledge (and they rarely are more than moments) when we realize that we are like them. 🐭



"It's not on the résumé, but I do all my own stunts."

Learning to Like Allen Ginsberg

BY JEFFREY HART

To the astonishment of everyone present, Allen Ginsberg showed up at a book party for my *When the Going Was Good!* (1982), a celebration of the 1950s and a refutation of the claim that they were boring. Given this context, Ginsberg's sudden appearance was perfect, as if arranged by Central Casting. The party was going on at the office of *National Review*, then on 35th Street, and centered in the conference room where the hors d'oeuvres and the bar were active, but the guests circulated through the hallways and the rabbit warren of small offices, one of which had belonged to Whittaker Chambers and now was mine.

Into the conference room festivities marched Ginsberg, his balding dome rising above remaining long black hair and ample beard, the whole giving the impression that all of this foliage was in the process of sliding downward. With him was Peter Orlovsky, a soft-looking blonde with a ponytail, whom we might as well call his wife, except, judging by some of Ginsberg's poems, on the point of sexual fidelity.

Among the many guests were several Dartmouth students, including Dinesh D'Souza, then the editor of the conservative *Dartmouth Review*, and soon to write the important books *Illiberal Education* and *The End of Racism*. When I introduced Ginsberg to D'Souza the poet appeared to be genuinely frightened. At first I thought he was kidding, but apparently not, because afterwards he spoke of "the D'Souza forces," as if imagining an invisible Panzer division.

It turned out that Ginsberg had somehow heard about the book party and had come with some specific things in mind. He cornered me and did all the

talking, while Orlovsky nodded but spoke not a word.

First on his agenda was flag-burning. In *When the Going Was Good!* I had quoted Jack Kerouac as saying that Ginsberg was a flag-burner, my source being a biography of Kerouac. Now Ginsberg and Kerouac are often linked as "Beat" pioneers, but they were different in important respects. For Ginsberg, America—or "Amerika"—is Moloch, and the only appropriate response to it is pariah status through insanity, drugs, crime, sexual depravity, and song. Kerouac was a patriot. Columbia legend has it that he quit football and left school out of alienation and in order to be a writer. No. We were in World War II, and he wanted to join up. He went to Boston, got drunk, and enlisted in the Army, the Navy, and the Merchant Marine. Somehow these federal offenses were straightened out and he served in the Merchant Marine. When Kerouac called Ginsberg a flag-burner, he meant it contemptuously. *On the Road* is really a bohemian valentine to America.

Ginsberg was adamant. Kerouac had lied. He had never, but never, burned an American flag. Ludicrously, he began to sound like an American Legionnaire, even though his poems amount to metaphorical flag-burning.

I did not get it. Perhaps, given his second item of business, his denial was intended to please me. Anyway, I was perfectly willing to accept his denial that he had ever burned a flag, and regard Kerouac's statement as a factoid and perhaps a metaphorical statement.

So we moved on. Ginsberg knew that I had just been appointed by President Reagan to a second six-year



ISMAEL ROLDAN

term on the National Council of the Endowment for the Humanities, which was in the business of giving away about \$100 million per year. He wanted a grant from the Endowment for Peter Orlovsky, who nodded. As I understood it, the grant was to subsidize the publication of a volume of poems by Orlovsky entitled *Clean Asshole Poems*.

The easy way out for me was to point out to Ginsberg the difference between the Humanities Endowment and its twin the Arts Endowment. The latter supported original creative work; the Humanities Endowment supported, broadly speaking, "comment," as in history, biography, analysis, education, research. We did not touch new poems.

Ginsberg was far from dense, but this distinction seemed to elude him completely. The *Clean Asshole Poems* were well outside our congressional mandate, and they certainly