

By James Bowman

Immune From Criticism

In a review earlier this year of *Austin Powers: Goldmember*, the third of Mike Myers's ventures into 1960s Bond-nostalgia, I inadvertently neglected to be critical. This caused some readers to wonder why I seemed to have liked such a stupid movie when the earlier installments in the series impressed me less. Honestly, I just forgot. Of course the thing amounts to what we movie critics call crap. That ought to go without saying. But then, did Mike Myers think it *wasn't* crap? I very much doubt it. In fact, I will go further and say that many of the worst movies being made today were intended by their makers to be just exactly as bad as they are.

This creates rather a dilemma for the critic. In critics' school they used to teach us that we were supposed to explore the gap between intention and achievement. What did the author intend, our beloved professor used to instruct us eager neophytes to ask ourselves, and how well did he succeed in realizing his intention? Bad movies were movies that, it was assumed, were trying to be good movies and just not making it. The authors had made a mistake in putting scene A before scene B instead of vice versa, or in moving the camera in a distracting way, or in allowing incoherence to creep into the plot or the actors to overact and so spoil the effect they were trying to create.

But Mr. Myers and his colleagues were not trying to create any effect besides laughter. Accordingly, their movie consists of one joke after another, like a stand-up routine. Some of the jokes are good and some are not so good, but the main thing is that they keep coming—so that even if there are several duds in a row, it will never be long between laughs. Anyone who tried to treat such a movie as an artistic whole would be the butt of the biggest joke of all. In this as in other cases these days, to be critical is itself a critical lapse. It is to fail

to "get" the central and endlessly repeatable joke of postmodern moviemaking, which is that the bad movie is bad because it is *supposed* to be bad.

Part of the reason for this state of aesthetic affairs is the way movies today are made. *The Santa Clause 2*, for instance, had been in development for eight years while negotiations proceeded with a view to protecting the original property, which was a big hit for Disney back in 1994. These negotiations were far more responsible for determining what was in the movie than any creative inspiration issuing, individually or severally, from the half-dozen people



who were eventually hired to write and direct it. The commercial requirements—for instance that the original star, Tim Allen, had to be back onboard—and the requirements of those requirements (Mr. Allen insisted that his portrayal of the bad clone-Santa had to look like a robot or a mannequin and not like his good-Santa) were simply stirred into the pot along with a miscellaneous collection of comic ideas from the behind-the-camera talent.

The final result had then to be submitted to Disney executives to make sure that it was in keeping with their corporate image and focus groups, to make sure there were enough laughs to make a sizable audience want to see it. That meant that fart jokes were in (though only the farts of the animatronic reindeer), while anything in the least demanding—or likely to be uncongenial to kids expecting a considerable outlay of presents by mom and dad—was out.

What, in such a case, is the job of the critic? To point to a failure of narrative or thematic unity? Geez Louise, Mr. Smart-Ass Critic, what do you think you're watching here? *Citizen Kane*?

In other words, what is the point of mentioning that a movie mixes heterogeneous materials, or jumps carelessly from one thing to another, or leaves loose ends sticking up through the narrative fabric like quills upon the fretful porpoentine when it has given not a moment's thought to avoiding such errors—indeed, so far from considering them errors, has positively cultivated them? In Hollywood, the people rule, and the people don't care about such old-fashioned stuff. At least they are supposed not to care, and the fact that they gave *Sweet Home Alabama* the biggest box-office ever for a September opening suggests that they really don't care.

Far be it from me to find fault with those who liked this movie, but even they have got to admit it is a conceptual mess. The makers of the film took an old-fashioned country-boy-outwits-city-slicker tale and added to it a celebration of the city-slicker's value system and shallow sophistication without knowing or caring that the two things just don't go together, like oil and water. The result is a central and seemingly fatal incoherence from the point of view of the traditional-minded critic. But if that incoherence doesn't bother either the filmmakers or the audience, where does the critic come in to tell them that their transaction, perfectly satisfactory to both parties, is quite mistaken?

Of course there have always been people who flock to bad movies, just as there have always been movie producers prepared to supply the appetite for kitsch. But even kitsch had its rules and could be adjudged more or less successful on its own terms. Moreover, bad movies resembled good movies, because they were trying to *be* good movies and failing—though lots of people were prepared to give them credit for trying. Nowadays, however, moviemakers and audiences alike seem to think it is more amusing if movies try to be bad of set purpose—like Todd Haynes's *Far From Heaven*—since that is supposed, by the magic of

paradox and irony, to make them good.

Don't just take my word for it. Haynes himself proudly proclaims that he set out to copy the kitschy 1950s movies of Douglas Sirk (*Magnificent Obsession*, *Imitation of Life* and, especially, *All That Heaven Allows*). But he goes the postmodernist crowd one better by suggesting that the transformative property of parody is so powerful that it makes even the original kitsch good. When *Far From Heaven* was released, J. Hoberman of the *Village Voice* wrote a swooningly appreciative piece about Sirk for the *New York Times*, identifying him as an unrecognized "hyperrealist" with elements of expressionism and a Brechtian dialectical sense. Sirk, it seems, was parodying the absurdities of the 1950s long before Haynes thought (very respectfully) to parody Sirk.

Does it surprise you that such a complex exercise in inter-textuality has a very simple moral, like a fairy tale? Sirk was also a moralist, it's true, although his present-day admirers might well dismiss all that side of his work as ironically intended. But Haynes's moral is (I think) *not* ironical, since it is the same as the moral of almost all Hollywood pictures since the 1960s. In fact, it is the same moral as *Sweet Home Alabama* and *The Santa Clause 2*, which is that anything that would seek to prevent an individual from doing just exactly what he or she pleases is an outrage and an abomination, particularly when the restraint is attempted on behalf of some larger social grouping—one's family, say, or one's country—or at the behest of some religious creed.

In this way the jettisoning of aesthetic rules becomes a complement of and a synecdoche for the jettisoning of moral rules—except, of course, for the very sternly moral rule that there shall be no moral rules. It may be objected that there is another moral imperative allowed by the Hollywood sensibility, which is this, that thou shalt not discriminate, a principle that Mr. Haynes is

very keen on reinforcing. But this is really the same exception, since discrimination on racial grounds is seen as just another variety of the moral "judgmentalism" involved in discrimination against homosexuals (that is the heavy-handed point made by *Far From Heaven*)—or adulterers (*Sweet Home Alabama*) or even badly behaved children (*The Santa Clause 2*).

Well, naturally, every patron of the movies churned out by the Disney shop in the last dozen years knows that there are no such creatures as bad children. In any difference of opinion between parent and child, between authority and individuality, the latter is always right. The only bad thing can be to identify anything or anyone else as bad. So the bad clone-Santa of *Santa Clause 2* is identifiable as such because of his wish to reintroduce the distinction between naughty and nice, with appropriate sanctions—that and his army of giant wooden soldiers. These may suggest a certain sympathy with the view, officially sanctioned by Disney for commercial if not for philosophical reasons, that insisting little Charlie should tidy up his room or not deface school property is tantamount to "fascism."

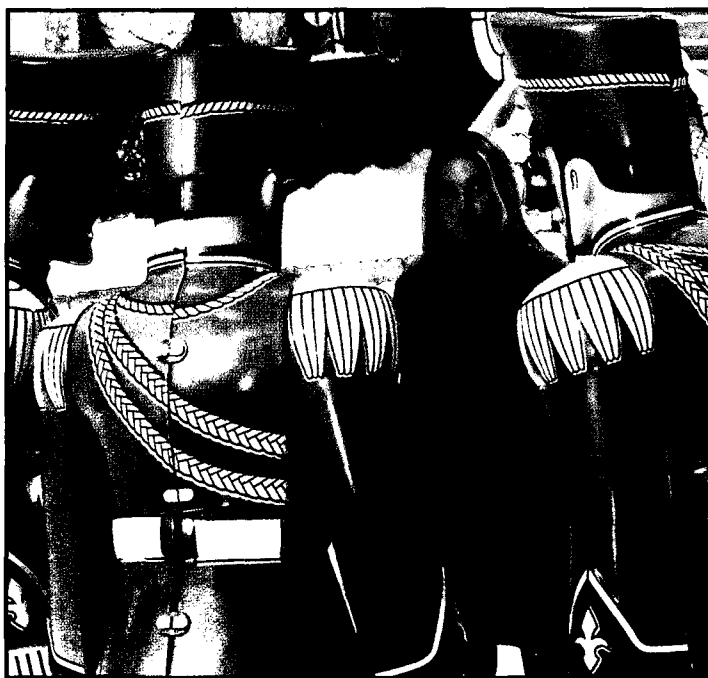
If such a simple-minded equation lies behind the Hollywood moral consensus, it is little wonder that 1950s-style kitsch is once again beginning to seem the appropriate vehicle for its expression. At any rate, it is certainly the case that we are seeing an

increase in movie moralism coupled with an ever wider and deeper but politically tinged moral illiteracy. The result is sometimes straightforward propaganda—feminist in the case of *Real Women Have Curves*, Marxist in the case of *Swept Away*—but is more often reducible to the vaguer but still unshakable movie-land conviction that order and tradition lead straight to Hitler and the Holocaust (*Max*), while belief in God and God's laws leads to drug dealing, money laundering, permanent oppression of the peasantry, and the sexual hypocrisy that kills (*El Crimen del Padre Amaro*).

To believe such stuff, it helps to believe that movie-land is the real world, since the movies have been pushing such propositions for a long time now. That is one reason why Mr. Haynes, among many others, finds his *Heaven* in parodying or alluding to other movies. The accumulation of absurdities is quite as useful as the insistence that absurdity is just exactly the effect you were trying to produce. Some such plea may be the excuse of the comically awful *Equilibrium*, which is founded on the laughably false premise that it is an excess of human feeling which produces war and cruelty. This belief produces a dystopian future in which a monstrously cruel totalitarian government keeps its people drugged up to the eyeballs in order to stamp out feeling entirely, and so avoid war.

Is this just more po-mo moralism? Are they being absurd on purpose? The secret of

twenty-first-century moviemaking is that it doesn't matter. The silly moral, or its opposite, is there for those who want it, but the silliness is one way that we can tell its only real purpose: to provide an excuse for the *Matrix*-like imagery of the central character's gunplay, which takes place in a fantasy world every bit as remote from reality as that of tyrant feelings-suppressors. The one is the counterpart of the other and both are imitations of other movies rather than of life. This may make them all but immune from criticism, but I hope it still leaves room for someone like me to be an enemy of movie-land itself. ↘



The Santa Clause 2



BOOKS IN REVIEW

Two Sides of Bush Two

Fighting Back:

The War on Terrorism—

From Inside the Bush White House

BY BILL SAMMON

Regnery Publishing/400 pages/\$27.95

Reviewed by Hugo Gurdon

When George W. Bush was running for the presidency, he liked to tell audiences on the campaign trail that he would restore dignity to the Oval Office. I believe he has succeeded, but setting that aside, it is interesting to consider why the line was a crowd pleaser. Many of those listening indeed were sickened by the debauch of the Clinton years. But there was more to Mr. Bush's rhetorical success than the moral indignation of partisan crowds.

The promise of restored dignity worked because Mr. Bush seemed like the right politician to be making it. Perhaps his greatest political asset—certainly one that bugs his critics more than most others—is that he carries conviction naturally, without lip-biting displays of ersatz sincerity. Possibly, of course, he is just a very good actor. But more plausibly, it works because Mr. Bush actually believes what he says and does what he thinks is right. He speaks plainly, if not always smoothly. Ordinary people can tell that they're not being sold a bill of goods.

All of which makes Mr. Bush the right sort of leader for the war on terror. For, if it is to be conducted with any hope of success, the war must be taken to terrorists wherever they lurk. And this can be attempted only by a president more concerned with what needs to be done than with the counsel of opinion polls.

President Bush is apparently comfortable taking this course because of his irreducible belief both in the goodness of America and in its consequent moral duty—not just legal right—to defend itself, its people, and its values. He knew soon (although not immediately) after the 9/11 terrorist outrages what the rest of his presidency would be about. He accepted the measure against which its success or failure would be tested. And he went out of his way to close rhetorical loopholes that another politician might have used to wriggle out of his duties or pretend that the job was done or change the subject.

Yet there is a troubling flaw in the Bush presidency. Even those of us who admire the president nevertheless worry at a tendency to let momentum sink into the political sand. Despite understanding, accepting, and embracing the task ahead, Mr. Bush's administration periodically loses energy and direction.

This was certainly its tendency before 9/11, when just three months after the huge political fillip of a major tax cut, his administration was floundering. And these

sporadic bouts of inappropriate quiescence have continued even after Mr. Bush discovered his actuating presidential mission against terrorism. For instance, a strange passivity settled on the White House around February or March of this year, lasting until Labor Day. Despite the smashing of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, overthrowing the Taliban, and a scattering of other successes against the global terrorist network, the Bush administration appeared to tread water throughout the middle of the year.

To be sure, in his address to Congress on September 20, 2001, the president warned: "Americans should not expect one battle, but a lengthy campaign, unlike any other we have seen. It may include dramatic strikes, visible on television, and covert operations, secret even in success."

It is important not to mistake a lull in telegenic victories with a lack of administrative purpose. Nevertheless, for much of this year the administration appeared confused (and was certainly confusing) about where it was going with Middle East policy. The Bush Doctrine was compromised over the issue of Palestinian suicide bombers in Israel. And the president did not do the political job of explaining to the country what he had in mind.

This dichotomy—a presidency with a clear, big, and self-defined mission, yet prone to listlessness—is one that awaits explanation by political historians. Doing so will take someone with great contacts inside the Bush White House.

That's not something that Bill Sammon attempts in his new book, *Fighting Back: The War on Terrorism—From Inside the Bush White House*. Indeed it is not clear that the author knew exactly what book he wanted to write—a minutely researched factual account of Mr. Bush's September 11 and the unfolding war on terror? A rigorous and balanced assessment of a wartime president? Or an unabashedly partisan celebration of a strong and clear-sighted national leader? *Fighting Back* tries at different points to be each of these things, but cannot be said to succeed at any of them. It ends up as a grab bag of a conservative's pet peeves (the liberal press being insolent) and favorite moments (among other things, the liberal press being exposed as an ass) of the past year.

Here's what's good about this book: Mr. Sammon includes great long slabs of quotation from the president's best post-

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